

# Do Mobility Attitudes Affect African-American Student Course Taking Behavior?

By

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# **Do Mobility Attitudes Affect African-American Student Course Taking Behavior?**

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# DO MOBILITY ATTITUDES AFFECT AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT COURSE TAKING BEHAVIOR?

## ABSTRACT

African-Americans have made significant progress in the United States; however, one area that shows that equality has not been achieved between African-American students and white students is the achievement gap. The achievement gap between African-American students and white students manifests on standardized/high-stakes tests, in the graduation rate, and in the disparity in discipline occurrences. Researchers have expressed that African-American students still profess that getting a good education is the key to a successful life; however, the school behaviors of African-American students do not match that sentiment. African-American students are less likely to enroll in advanced placement courses, and those who do enroll in these courses are less likely to pass their exams when compared to white students. Students who lack the resources and support and are academically behind in grade level will often shy away from advanced placement courses because they are ill-prepared for the rigors and expectations of the courses. But if students are on grade level, academically prepared, and value their education, more African-American students should be enrolling in advanced placement courses and should be successfully passing their exams. The purpose of this semi-structured, qualitative study was to determine if there is an alternate explanation as to why African-American students in an urban school districts who do value their education, value college, have high aspirations, have substantial support (both at home and at school), attend supportive/unbiased schools, and are not oppositional, are not enrolling in advanced placement course.

Key words: Attitude-Achievement, Oppositional Culture, African-American Students, Advanced Placement, Achievement Gap, Urban School District

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The objective of this dissertation is to explore the low number of African-American students enrolled in Advanced Placement classes, with a focus on academically qualified African-American students. Despite the advances that the United States has made in terms of equality, a large gap still exists in academic achievement between African-American students and white students. One aspect in education where the gap is prevalent is in the number of African-American students who are enrolled in and are successful in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. AP classes are designed to provide a rigorous education for students who aspire to work at their highest capabilities and to advance through school as quickly as possible. Students who can successfully navigate the rigors of the AP program are then able to enter institutions of higher education with earned college credit and are well prepared for the demands of college. Having worked at high levels during the AP program in high school, students are better equipped to succeed in college both in terms of academic and emotional achievement. The mere fact that African-American students in large part are missing out on this opportunity only continues to fuel the performance gap that exists in education.

Today, there are greater numbers of African-American students graduating from high school and attending college than at any other time in U.S. history. However, the low number of African-American students participating and being successful in AP classes continues to persist, when compared to white students. The numbers are even more staggering when the geographical location of the students (urban vs. suburban) and socio-economic status of the students are considered. It is not unreasonable to believe that students who do not value their education, who put forth minimal effort, and/or who do not see a need for an education, will

usually suffer academic hardships. The purpose of this study is to examine if there is a section of African-American students who do value their education and have access to the necessary resources and support, and still are opting out of the AP program.

A goal of this study is to gain an understanding of student perceptions towards the AP program, from qualified students who choose to, or not to, participate in the AP program. There are two perspectives to uniquely explain student behavior with regards to the AP program that I chose to use in this inquiry. Using the concepts of Dr. John Ogbu (oppositional culture) and those of Dr. Roslyn Mickelson (attitude-achievement paradox) as the background of this research, this study sought a reasonable explanation as to why African-American students who are otherwise qualified and able to be successful in the AP program, are opting not to participate in the AP program. Ogbu's research was not centered solely on oppositional culture, but on changing the black community by erasing the disparity in economic, political, and community systems. Students who live in urban areas may believe success can be achieved through a good education but will struggle with seeing the purpose of it all because of what they experience within their communities daily. The abstract/concrete attitudes of Mickelson's research showed that there two mindsets at play when looking at student's perception of success. In the abstract mindset, African-American students believe at approximately the same rate as white students, that getting a good education can provide opportunities for success later in life. The disparity between African-American and white students manifests in the concrete mindset, where the focus is on lived experiences. African-American students believe in the concrete that will not achieve success no matter how hard they work. It is in the concrete mindset, that strongly correlates with success in that the concrete drives the actions of the students towards achieving success or not.

African-American students are disciplined and suspended at a greater rate than white students and miss more days of instruction. Absenteeism is a large reason why student achievement suffers among African-American students mainly because there is a lack of consistent access to academic content, practice, analysis, and skill development. Despite an increase in cultural awareness and diversity training for educators in urban and suburban schools, there remains a large discipline gap that reflects African-American students missing more days due to out of school suspension (OSS) and in school suspension (ISS) when compared to white students. When OSS/ISS days are combined with the average numbers of days that students miss school, African-American students typically begin to fall behind academically.

It can be reasoned that with little effort put into school on the part of the student, or a lack of support and resources from the school, that the result would be those students not meeting the requirements for enrolling in AP classes. A lack of motivation and a feeling of being under-prepared, serves as a plausible explanation for under-performing students to have low grade point averages and to lag academically. Students who underperform in school are expected to score below average in academic categories such as graduation rates, attendance rates, and standardized test scores.

Urban schools are twice as likely to be labeled as hard to staff schools, due to the obstacles that they face on the daily basis whether they are real or perceived. Hard to staff schools often are relegated to hiring teachers with minimum experience (0-3 years) and/or are not certified in their assigned content area. These schools also suffer from a lack of resources (technology, money, staff) and are asked to educate a group of students who's needs cannot be met by general education strategies. Research says that these are common views for

attempting to explain why the academic gap continues to grow between African-American students and white students.

I chose the Kansas City Public School District (KCPS) because it is large urban school district, that has a large population of African-American students and offers the AP program. The four neighborhood schools in this study were chosen because, unlike the two signature schools, they not allowed to deny students based on academic levels and must admit all students who seek to enroll. This is important because it allows me to interview students who have not been picked or set aside in a special school because of their academic abilities. These students are successful despite having to matriculate through school with a wide range of students with varying academic abilities, and teachers with varying degrees of expertise and experience.

This study is different in design from other studies because of the focus on academically successful students in urban schools, who have met the requirements to participate in the AP program. By focusing on urban schools with a large population of African-American students, the threat of obstacles preventing African-American students from realizing success was, in theory minimized. It is assumed that the students and the school, would have the support of the community and would experience minimal human interference when it terms of promoting students to high academic achievement. I was able to control for student motivation and/or attitudes towards the AP program, by eliminating the factors that are associated with a mixed/diverse school. (i.e. institutional favoritism based on race, racial competitions among students, etc.) I interviewed 10 students who met the prerequisites for participating in the AP program, 10 students of whom had been enrolled in the AP program or have thought about enrolling in the AP program, to hear directly from the

students the reasoning behind their decision to participate in AP or not. The interviews were driven by the responses of the students, using inductive questioning to allow a free-flowing conversation that gave the student a platform to speak freely about their thoughts about the AP program. Listening for themes and categories, the interviews provided for a better understanding of the students' perceptions of AP classes and the effect they believed it would have on their futures. More importantly, the goal was to uncover an explanation as to why qualified African-American students are opting out of AP classes despite the known benefits of AP classes.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

#### **Do Mobility Attitudes Affect African-American Student Course Taking Behavior?**

Even though the United States is one of the most diverse nations in the world, there are still areas of inequality throughout our society based on race. From quality housing to job opportunities, minorities continue to lag behind their white counterparts in terms of access, training, and attainment of skills and opportunities. This is even more pronounced in education, when comparing the achievement levels of black/African-American students and white students. School districts continue to be faced with the dilemma of the achievement gap between blacks and whites, and how best to address the matter (Daniels, 1998; Grantham, 2011). The signs of black students lagging white students begin to show up as early as kindergarten, and only widens as they progress through elementary, middle school, and high school (Fraleigh-Lohrfink, Schneider, Whittington & Feinberg, 2013). Naturally, because this gap exists even in kindergarten and widens over time, there then becomes the issue of black students having access to or participating in gifted education programs (Adkison-Bradley, Johnson, Rawls, & Plunkett, 2006).

College readiness and academic preparedness are often used interchangeably, but in fact are not one in the same. In 1983, President Ronald Reagan commissioned a report on the state of secondary schools, and thus set the course for high-stakes testing and stringent accountability measures, to determine college readiness by students. This course, according to Barnes, Slate, and LeBouef (2010), was set without regard for the creativity, critical thinking, self-efficacy, and self-regulation, all of which are necessary for success in college. The definition of college readiness became test scores and district report cards, and not about



the building and creating of the “whole” student, who is prepared to tackle the rigors of college. Test scores such as the ACT, SAT, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), State and Local Assessments are good indicators of academic preparedness but are not necessarily an indication of college readiness. Unfortunately, with the under-representation of minority students in gifted education programs, minorities are at a disadvantage in terms of receiving the exposure to academic rigor necessary for college.

Minority under-representation in gifted education programs is a complex problem, with reasons ranging from government policies, education school systems, and local level support/influence including parents, students, and teachers (Ford & Harmon, 2001; Kitano, 2003). These factors have contributed heavily to the under-representation of minority students in gifted education programs and continue to plague the progress of reversing the problem. Research has been thorough in determining solutions to fix the under-representation of minority students in gifted education programs, but most are centered on underachieving students, providing or fixing resources, or teacher training. Suggested policy strategies for increasing college readiness among minority student include: Develop valid indicators of college readiness and build accountability; help high school educators meet instructional challenges; bridge the information and social capital; and use incentives and strong signals for students (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Each of the above suggestions are centered on teacher bias, teacher knowledge, and resources, to help combat the under-representation of minority students in gifted education programs. However, there is group of minority students who go unnoticed and thus are often not accounted for when discussing strategies for improving the number of minority students who participate in gifted education programs.

## **Alternative Explanation**

Students who underperform in school are expected to score below average in academic categories such as graduation rates, attendance rates, and standardized test scores. It can be reasoned that with little effort put into school on the part of the student, or a lack of support and resources from the school, that the result would be those students not meeting the requirements for enrolling in AP classes.

However, with students who are well-prepared and are performing at levels of high academic achievement, African-American students should be enrolling in and being successful in AP classes at a much higher rate. In addition to performing at high academic levels, these students also may exhibit a high level of self-efficacy and have the necessary resources available to them to succeed. With a higher percentage of African-Americans classified as middle-class, the number of African-American students enrolled in suburban schools has increased (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010). With an increase in the number of African-American students in the middle class, resources and accessibility to AP classes are also increased (Castellio, Cobb, Darity, McMillen, & Tyson, 2001). Increased resources are described as highly qualified teachers, updated school buildings, and the availability of adequate school funding. Highly qualified teachers often have graduate degrees, greater than five years of teaching experience, and access to relevant professional development (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MODESE], 2017). School buildings would be designed to foster a collaborative atmosphere, centered on the 21st-century student, preparing them to be innovators of knowledge and critical thinkers. Adequate funding is defined as being able to provide the necessary materials and resources required to educate students so that they graduate with the greatest amount of knowledge possible. With this

increased number of middle class African-American students, in theory, access to the necessary resources for success should also be increased. The question then becomes, if students are not oppositional towards education, have access to resources (funding, highly qualified teachers and staff, family and community support), and have met the qualifications to enroll in AP courses, why are these students not enrolling in AP classes?

### **The Advanced Placement Program**

During the beginning of the 20th century, there was a noticeable gap between secondary and higher-level education. Due to this disparity, the Ford Foundation created a fund that supported the advancement of education. From this fund, the Advanced Placement program, which was designed to provide a rigorous education for students who aspired to work at their highest capabilities and to advance through school as quickly as possible, was born. The Advanced Placement program now offers over 35 courses ranging from higher level mathematics (calculus, statistics) to upper level Chinese, music, and art.

The AP program also focuses on hiring talented and imaginative staff members who can motivate and inspire higher-level thinking by students and can guide students through independent study (College Board AP, 2017). Teachers can participate in innovative professional development that is dedicated to continuing the growth of the teacher and focuses on maintaining high expectations of the students while they are in school.

There were two studies conducted initially by educators at both the secondary and collegiate levels (College Board AP, 2017). The first study was conducted by three elite prep high schools – Andover, Exeter, and Lawrenceville – and three prestigious colleges – Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. The conclusion from the study was that highly qualified and talented teachers was a requirement, and that achievement exams could enter students into

college with advanced standing. The second study then brought together leaders in all disciplines to create a collegiate-style curriculum for the secondary level. Eleven courses were offered initially in the 1955-1956 school year, but now more than 35 courses and a pre-AP program is offered for the underclassmen.

In recent years, there has been a push to offer AP courses in urban, low socio-economic schools, to expose and encourage greater minority participation in the AP program. During the 1980s and 1990s, the College Board began to actively support AP programming in urban schools. In 2010, over 853,000 students took at least one AP exam. Of those students, 59% earned a passing score of 3, 4, or 5, which are required for college credit. Even though there has been considerable growth in the number of students who are taking AP courses and exams, there is still a gap in achievement among certain groups. African-Americans made up approximately 14.6% of graduating seniors in 2010 but comprised less than 4% of the seniors who passed their AP exams. Despite a growth in overall number of students who participate in the AP program, minorities are still underrepresented in both number and achievement (College Board AP, 2017).

### **Academic Achievement and Its Barriers**

The academic achievement of black students has been well researched and discussed and continues to be a serious concern in education. The graduation rates of black students continue to be lower than those of whites (Bell, 2014; Howard & Terry, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), the 2015-2016 adjusted cohort graduation rate for public high school students in Missouri is 91%, while the graduation rate for blacks is only 76%. Nationally, the graduation gap between black and white has narrowed, but black students still graduate at a lower rate

than white students. Black students routinely underperform on standardized testing (i.e., ACT, SAT, and Local and State assessments) when compared to whites. The ACT Profile Report of the Class of 2016 indicates just how big the differences in African-American student scores and white student scores really are. The national average ACT composite score for the class of 2016 was 20.9 for all students. Black/African-American students were outscored by white students in all tested areas of the ACT: mathematics, English, reading, and science. The Black/African-American student average composite ACT score is 17.3, while the average ACT composite score for white students is 22.1 (ACT, 2017). Additionally, black/African-American students' composite ACT score was lower than that of every ethnic group recorded by ACT: White, Asian, American Indian/Native American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native Hawaiian. In the state of Missouri, all graduating seniors take the ACT, while states such as Kansas have only a fraction of the graduating seniors taking the exam. Because there are more urban areas in Missouri, it was expected that the composite ACT score for Missouri students would regress, but the test data gives a more accurate account of student performance and college/career readiness (Williams, 2016). The average composite ACT score for the Missouri class of 2016 students was 20.2, which is below the national average and down from the 20.8 average of the 2015 class of test takers. ACT statistics for the state of Missouri shows black/African-American students were outpaced by every ethnic group recorded by ACT (MODESE, 2017). White students carried an average above the national average, 21.1, and black/African-American students had an average of 16.6, which is well below the national average. In the Kansas City Public School District, a predominantly urban/minority school district, the average composite ACT score was 16.6 – again, far below the national average.

The number of black students who attend college and graduate in four years is lower than that of white students. A major concern is the difference between college readiness and academic preparedness (Barnes et al., 2010). Of the 2,090,342 students who took the ACT test during the 2015-2016 school year, 13% (272,363) of the students were black/African-American, and 54% (1,119,398) of the students who tested were white. A closer look at the data shows that the types of classes a student took also enhanced the student's chance of success on the ACT test. Those same classes also predicted the types of students who went on to college and completed college in four to five years. Students who routinely took advanced level courses or had completed more than the state minimum in course requirements scored higher than those students who had not met the state minimum course requirement.

Unfortunately, many African-American students are not enrolled in classes that otherwise would prepare them to be successful on the ACT exam, thus limiting their ability to score well and to gain admission into good colleges. Black and Latino students make up 37% of the school population in the United States, but only 27% of the number of students in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Only 18% of the 27% of black and Latino students who are enrolled in AP classes will pass their AP exams. That amounts to approximately one out of every 37 black or Latino students who are enrolled will successfully pass their AP exam (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Even though 69% of public high schools offer an AP program, the number of African-American students enrolled in at least one AP class is approximately 9%, compared to 59% for white students. This disparity also is further illustrated in the number of African-American students who have access to AP classes. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), 81% of white students have access to AP mathematics and science classes, while 57% of African-American students have the same

access. The lack of access to these AP classes serves as barrier to increasing the number of African-American students who enroll in the classes. The under-representation of black students in AP classes is a direct effect of the lack of access to AP classes, in addition to previously researched teacher bias, lack of resources (both in school and in the home), and under-preparedness (Daniels, 1998; Grantham, 2011). Even though there is data supporting the argument that students should take advanced level classes beyond the state graduation requirement, black students continue to lag in this area.

Students of low-socioeconomic status (low-SES) have been found to perform worse academically than students of other socio-economic levels. This is not a new phenomenon, as it has been studied and analyzed many times over previous decades. Low-SES has been linked to academic achievement due to the influence of living in poverty. Students who live in poverty are often without necessities that are taken for granted by more affluent families (Castellio et al., 2001). Living conditions routinely include single-parent households, low education levels among the adults, and minimum amounts of food, space, and income. This is not to say there is not love in the home, but it has been shown that family income, parent education levels, and resources are predictors of academic success (Blair, Blair, & Madamba, 1999). Parent income can dictate the amount of exposure that a student has to adequate support and learning materials outside of the school. Low income often places the parents in a situation where meeting the bare needs of the family – shelter, food, and utilities – takes precedence over academic needs (i.e., paper, pencils, and books) (Castellio et al., 2001). Without the ability to provide additional resources or support, the student is usually limited to receiving and interacting with content during school hours. This places low-SES students at a

disadvantage, due to their lack of interaction with material that serves as preparation for school success.

In addition to the above, students of low-SES also miss out on experiences that can drive academic achievement in the classroom. When a family struggles with low income, extra-curricular activities and cultural outings are not options due their usually expensive cost. Students of more affluent families often take family trips or vacations and participate in activities that expose them to diverse cultures and allow for experiences where academics can be seen outside of the classroom. According to Lareau (2003), the unequal childhoods of students determines the social and cultural capital obtained by the student. Students of middle-class families reared with accomplishment as the language of the home – meaning that logic, negotiation, and critical thinking skills are cultivated throughout the home – are taught to interact and advocate for themselves with adults. There is a sense of entitlement among the students that drives their actions and thought processes. This skill carries into the classroom because the student has been taught to identify their needs and how to ask for what they want. Students of low-SES are reared with the understanding that natural growth will take place over time. Low-SES students spend more time in activities that do not require fees and adult supervision, as opposed to the countless numbers of practices, recitals, and events of the middle class.

Students of low-SES seldom can leave the confines of their neighborhood, and if they do, they travel to immediately outside their neighborhood. This narrows a student's perception because they are not exposed to life outside of what they see every day, and they carry that perception into the school. It can be reasoned that if a student does not see academic success within their household or community or have the chance to interact with



successful persons, the likelihood that that student will obtain academic success is minimal (Ainsworth, 2002). Ainsworth found that adults who held degrees above high school or worked in management/professional careers, positively impacted student achievement by influencing the student's academic expectations. When a student can have an example of what academic success can do for them, the chances are greater that the student will achieve academically. Dr. Ogbu (1992) discussed the effects of what students see as a predictor of how much effort a student will put into school work. The understanding is that if my efforts in school will not pay off for me, then why put forth effort to be successful in school. This argument comes from Dr. Ogbu's discussion of the difference between involuntary immigrants and migrant minorities, and the perception of the dominant race.

Students who are classified as low-SES typically attend neighborhood schools in urban areas that qualify for federal money which supports low-SES schools (i.e., Title I fund). Schools that are designated as Title I are often faced with a myriad of concerns that are not often addressed with federal money. These concerns typically far outweigh the amount of money that is given to the school and leaves building and district leaders with the task of "making do" with what they have. Lack of school resources comes in many forms: unqualified teaching staff, over-crowded classrooms, minimal technology, outdated school materials, and run-down school buildings.

Urban public schools are routinely listed as hard to staff and typically attract new or ineffective teachers to the building (Education Commission of the States, 2007; National Education Agency, 2017; Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004). The No Child Left Behind Act required that schools hire "highly qualified" teachers or face being penalized for not doing so. In theory, this mandate seems appropriate, but in the urban setting, this mandate

only worked to place more pressure on schools by threatening to take away precious funds from the school. There are several reasons that experienced teachers cite for not wanting to work in urban schools: safety, discipline, and the level of education of the students (Southeast Center for Teaching Quality, 2004). This is concerning, because teachers have the greatest impact on student achievement, yet students in urban schools are left with under-qualified, inexperienced, and ineffective teachers. This trend starts as early as kindergarten, thus placing students at a disadvantage that follows them from kindergarten to the 12th grade.

When evaluating student preparedness, one must look at motivation and perception. How a student sees himself plays a vital role in the effort and energy that student puts into his/her studies. If the student sees himself as being simply a receiver of information and is not allowed to be a participant in the classroom, chances are there will be little motivation to adhere to the school expectations. Self-efficacy is the foundation all students need to be strong and determined when facing obstacles and resistance (Whiting, 2006). If students are not able exhibit self-efficacy, the student typically become apathetic and disengaged. If this can occur, one can see how this could potentially lead to the student being under prepared. When a student disengages, class work, homework, and school attendance begin to suffer, and the student begins a downward spiral towards becoming behind.

During the ninth grade, a significant number of black students fail their classes and are relegated to playing catch-up to meet graduation requirements. This is shown in the large number of ninth grade students, compared to the much smaller 12th grade classes that graduate each year. Four-year cohort graduation numbers show that, in urban schools, roughly 30% to 40% of students do not graduate within that four-year window. The achievement gap between black and white students has narrowed in recent years, but a gap

persists in several aspects. Graduation rates, standardized test scores, attendance, and discipline all show that there is a gap between black and white students and are a hindrance to student achievement.

Principals, teachers, and counselors play a vital role in the achievement of African-American students by way of their leadership and guidance. However, research has shown that there is a bias within each level of the school hierarchy. Bias is present in terms of who receives instruction, how the instruction is delivered, who is recommended for classes, and who receives what level of discipline. From the perspective of the administrators, black male students are suspended at a greater rate than their white counterparts. According to the Department of Education, black students are suspended at a rate three times greater than that of white students. Students who are suspended are out of the classroom for up to 10 days and are becoming that many days further behind in school. With very little support and/or resources, black students of low-SES become in danger of falling further behind with each suspension.

Student schedules are put in place under the leadership of the counselor. Counselors are charged with advising students on what courses they should take, in preparation to meet the student's individual goal. Based on the counselor's belief system, it is likely that counselors interject their personal beliefs into advisement of their students. Counselors are safe zones and as experts for advisement, thus causing students to yield to their advice and not to question the assertions of the counselor. Students of low-SES do not necessarily learn how to advocate for themselves with adults, thus causing these students to fall victim to counselor bias. Next to the teacher, the counselor has the next largest effect on student achievement and are important pieces in the academic process.

Teacher bias in the classroom takes on many forms, from delivery of instruction to classroom management. Teachers spend the most time with students, and thus carry the most influence of any staff member in their respective buildings. A teacher's delivery of instruction can be biased because of the methods used. Research has shown that many black students are kinesthetic learners who would benefit from movement in the classroom and hands-on instruction. Yet, many classrooms in the urban core still operate in rows and with lecture serving as the primary distribution of information. In recent years, there has been a push to change how classrooms operate, i.e., moving from desks to tables, learning centers in the classroom, and standing desks as opposed to seated desks. But with the education budget being on a yearly basis, Title I funds being cut, and not enough coming in from taxes, low-SES schools still lag in terms of meeting the needs of the students. Teacher bias shows up in assigning work and in grading assignments. If there are low parental education levels at home, it is unreasonable to expect that a student can receive assistance with homework when there is no one at home to assist them. Classroom management and discipline are the other areas where teacher bias is present and can have an impact on student perception and student advancement.

### **Oppositional Culture**

Student perceptions of AP classes contributes to the under-representation of minority students in gifted education programs. A study of qualified fifth grade students (Harmon, 2002), found that every student decided to not participate in the gifted education program for a myriad of reasons. Concerns about the curriculum, their potential teachers, and the teacher's teaching methods, were all cited as reasons for not participating in the gifted education program (Harmon, 2002). In addition, fear of separation from social and peer

groups and being racially bullied (Grantham & Biddle, 2014) were also well-documented reasons for students not participating in gifted education programs. Racial bullying, including the slur “Acting White,” is a major fear of minority students that it could get them rejected from their own culture and leave them isolated from their peers (Morris, 2002). According to Ogbu (1992), students coped by using various strategies to hide their giftedness and lessen the opportunity for ridicule. These strategies include: Camouflaging (hiding your true academic attitude), Cultural passing (adopting Euro-American behavior), Accommodation with assimilation (following school norms while in school, following minority group outside of school), and Clowning (acting like a comedian). These strategies negatively impact the under-representation of minorities in gifted education programs because they can serve as a distraction from the opportunity to receive the high-level rigor and training.

African-American students are more than capable of being successful in AP programs, but many are not taking advantage of the opportunities to do so, thus adding to the under-representation narrative. One explanation for this is the idea of the oppositional culture and racial difference in school performance (the resistance model), which was discussed by Dr. Jon Ogbu (1992). Ogbu explained the difference between immigrant minorities and involuntary minorities. Immigrant minorities are those who migrated to the “host” country of their own free will, while involuntary minorities were historically enslaved, colonized, or conquered (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). Ogbu argued that immigrant minorities often had favorable attitudes towards their conditions because they often compared their opportunities to those of their native country. Optimism towards their chances for success and the payoff for hard work in the new country were key components of the positive attitudes of immigrant minorities.

On the other hand, involuntary immigrants were in a “vulnerable position,” because they did not migrate with the expectation to improve their condition. The thought is that involuntary immigrants did not have a reference by which to compare but were often left to compare their current condition to that of the dominant culture. If a group of people are left to compare their current condition to that of the dominant culture, with little positivity of their own, it is not difficult to understand why there would be despair and resentment towards the systems that are being placed upon them. Ogbu explained student attitudes towards education and the causes for their successes or failures. The involuntary immigrant sees limited job opportunities, therefore putting minimal effort into success in school. The assumed relationship is that minorities with negative views of their prospects will ultimately put little effort into education because they do not see a benefit in doing so.

This mindset leads to the central thesis of Ogbu’s research that occupational opportunity shapes students’ personal characteristics, such as their motivational levels and value for schooling, linking societal conditions and the students’ daily actions (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998). If students do not see the value in their educational work as being beneficial to their lives, then there will be minimal effort put into being successful in school. However, if students do not feel oppositional towards education, then they should value the challenge and promise that AP classes bring. The assumption can be made that white students are more apt to participate in AP classes because they see the value in the work that the classes will require, and thus minority students should benefit from the same reference of thinking.

## **Attitude-Achievement Paradox**

Historically, education has always been held in high regard among blacks in the United States, even though it was not widely available until approximately 100 years post-slavery. The belief stems from the idea that education can lift blacks from their place of despair and hopelessness and into a life of opportunity and success. Education is a means to obtaining the American Dream and making a better life for their families and offspring. Blacks tended to hold education in a higher regard than that of whites but have consistently fared worse than whites in academic success. Despite relative growth in the number of blacks who attend college and are receiving college degrees, the disparity between blacks and whites in academic success are still discouraging. In a 1966 report, Coleman and his colleagues stated that blacks held “highly favorable attitudes towards education irrespective of their performance.” Research has been conducted on the topic by Ogbu (1992), Patchen (1982), and Mickelson (1990), and each found that blacks continue to value education, while consistently underachieving in school.

Ogbu argued, “members of a social group that faces a job ceiling know that they do so, and this knowledge channels and shapes their children’s academic behavior” (Ogbu, 1978, cited in Mickelson, 1990, p. 44). Ogbu’s job ceiling reference is in terms of practices that do not permit minorities to compete “freely” for jobs they are qualified/able to do. Black students see their efforts in school as not producing the same outcomes as those of the dominant group for the same efforts. The attitude- achievement paradox is based on the belief that both blacks and whites operate with two sets of attitudes towards education. One set of beliefs is based on abstract attitudes about education, to success and upward mobility. The

other set of beliefs is based on concrete attitudes, which reflects the student's realities and experiences (Mickelson, 1990).

The abstract attitude is based on the dominant "American Ideology" that education is the solution to most social problems. It is believed that blacks feel as though with education, they can change their station in life; that somehow, by gaining an education will level the playing field and/or provide opportunities to advance in the workplace. Education is a way to eradicate poverty and hopelessness, and the added credentials are seen and evaluated as favorable by the larger society. According to Mickelson's research (1990), black male and female students score far above their white counterparts, when asked if they believe that education (5.50/5.27 for middle class black male/female students respectively, compared to 5.06/5.09 for middle class white male/female students) is the key for social mobility. When looking at the working class, the difference between blacks and whites grows even more with 5.28/5.34 for working class black male/female students respectively, compared to 4.99/5.21 working class white male/female students. Noticeable is that the abstract beliefs of the working-class white male decrease, when compared to the middle-class white male student. Despite the disadvantages that blacks still face, studies show that blacks, whether working class or middle class, still value the promise of a good education.

The concrete attitude is based on the realities of the student and their experiences. The student in this situation may believe that education is the key to success, but not necessarily for them. It is described as "lived culture" (Mickelson, 1990). Lived culture is introduced in ongoing interactions and as an environment where class, race, gender meanings and antagonisms are lived out (Apple & Weiss, 1983). The belief is that regardless of what I do, I will not ascend to the same levels of those who are in the dominant culture. It is here,



according to Mickelson, where student perceptions are revealed about their probable returns on education from an opportunity structure. Mickelson's research (1990) produced the following mean discrepancy scores: 4.38/4.43 for middle class black male/female students respectively, compared to 4.90/5.00 for middle class white male/ female students. There exists a gap for working class as well: 4.19/4.19 for working class black male/female students respectively, compared to 4.54/4.81 for working class white male/female students. For both the middle class and the working class, the abstract attitudes towards education by blacks are higher than those of the white students. However, concrete attitudes are lower for blacks than whites within both social classes. Mickelson points out that the discrepancy between abstract and concrete student attitudes are much larger for blacks than for whites.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Empirical Data**

This study was conducted in a Midwestern urban school district, with over 30 public schools and other academic facilities. This school district services approximately 16,000 students and covers approximately 70 square miles (MODESE, 2017). The city is comprised of 481,420 residents (United States Census Bureau), with approximately 1.5 million residents in the metropolitan area, covering both sides of the state line. The city boasts several Fortune 500 companies that house their headquarters in the area and is the home of top tier public and private universities, a strong technology community, and an emphasis on urban revitalization and renewal.

Of the 15,473 students enrolled in the district, 54.75% is classified as African-American, while Hispanics make up 28.64%, and whites are 9.83% (MODESE, 2017). Over the past 25 years, the African-American and white student populations have declined from 69.06% and 25.17% respectively, as the Hispanic enrollment has grown from 4.19% to 28.64%. The percentage of free and reduced lunch has grown from 74.1% in 1991 to 89.4% in 2014. Beginning with the 2015 school year, the entire school district became free lunch for all students.

Historically, the school district served as the largest school district in the city and reported an enrollment of approximately 60,000 students until the time white-flight began. The school district remained segregated until the 1960s, when blacks were able to move to the south end of the city (Benson, 1996). Tactics were used to keep the district segregated (i.e., redrawing school boundaries and redlining – refusing housing loans to minorities). During

the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the school district transitioned from predominantly white to predominantly minority. The district population began to drop, which led to over 30 schools being closed during that time. The academic achievement levels of the district declined and led city residents to look for alternatives to public education that did not necessitate paying private school tuition. The federal government, looking for ways to improve public education in the urban core, fostered the idea of charter schools. With the allowance of charter schools, the school district began to see a decline in enrollment due more to school competition than to white-flight.

The setting for the study was four high schools within the district, each positioned at different areas of the city. Socioeconomic factors were identified and measured as comparable but were not used as a criterion in this study. The population of the school district is 15,473 students, which represents steady enrollment for the past decade. In 1991, the district reported an enrollment of 34,527 but has experienced a steady decline to the present enrollment (MODESE, 2017). There are six high schools, four of which are neighborhood schools and two of which are signature schools. Additionally, there are two middle schools (grades 7-8), 23 elementary schools, and two alternative schools (k-6, 7-12).

I chose to use the four neighborhood schools because they presented the greatest opportunity to identify AP-qualified students who may or may not participate in the AP program. The two signature schools have entrance requirements and place an overwhelming emphasis on academics and post-secondary education. Eligibility for entrance into the signature schools are not based on the student's address, but on test scores, discipline, and recommendation. The expectation at the signature schools is that the students will graduate and attend college, therefore encouraging them to put a greater effort into earning and

receiving good grades and taking challenging courses. Like the signature schools, neighborhood schools must analyze school data and create a school improvement plan with an emphasis on raising student achievement levels. I assumed that the students at the signature schools may not experience the same type of barriers that the students at the neighborhood schools must navigate. For the sake of this study, barriers may be defined as (but not limited to): teacher bias, high discipline infractions, lack of building and familial support, lack of resources, negative peer pressure, and academic deficiencies (low levels of literacy and math skills).

### **Available Data**

In Mickelson's research (1990), she discussed the concept that there are two attitudes at play regarding student perceptions about school – the abstract and the concrete. In the abstract, students believe that a good education is the key to their success and opportunities and can propel them to a better station in life. However, in the concrete, the student does not believe that an education will change their station in life, based on their real-world experiences. The achievement-attitude paradox allows for an alternative idea about why participation in the AP program is low among minority students. Understandably, students who expend very little effort on their studies are not expected to enroll in rigorous coursework such as AP. And it is reasonable to believe that students who are well qualified for the AP program will thus choose to participate in the program. The question is then, why students are who qualified for the AP program are not choosing to participate in it.

More than 30 courses are offered by AP, each one of which connects directly to a wide variety of college majors and careers (College Board, 2017). The AP program is focused on providing a rigorous curriculum with the goal of preparing motivated students for college.

The AP program has been offered in the district I studied for over 30 years and thousands of their students have participated in the program. Student performance on the AP exam is not readily available, making it difficult to determine how many students are successful or unsuccessful on the AP exams and in which schools. Collecting the data required gaining access from district officials (Data and Research Director). Although AP data is not readily available, it was assumed that this district follows the same trends as other urban districts: lack of resources, low funding, under-qualified staff, and low academic achievement would lead to low minority AP participation numbers, based on city population, business growth, and district enrollment.

To get an idea of what the district data is, data were gathered from secondary sources to provide an opportunity to draw conclusions on student AP success. Three of the district schools were listed in the annual report of U.S. News & World Report (2017), complete with various data points of information. There were three points of data US News presented that were beneficial to this analysis: Disadvantaged Student Performance Rate, Advanced Placement Participation Rate, and Graduation Rate (U.S. News & World Report, 2017). The Disadvantage Student Performance represents the percentage of minority students or students of low-SES who score proficient or advanced on the state assessment. In addition, data on the gap between school and state among disadvantaged students were used, with a positive number representing the students who attend the school scoring higher than the state average, and a negative representing the students who scored lower than the state. The AP Participation Rate is the percentage of 12th graders who took at least one AP exam during the previous school year. US News (2017) also provided the Participant Pass Rate Percentage (percent of participants that passed at least one exam), and Exam Pass Rate (percent of exams

taken and passed). The graduation rate (MODESE, 2017; US News, 2017) can give background data on how school climate, culture, and expectations can hinder the participation levels of qualified students in the AP program.

The independent variable in this study was the attitudes/perceptions towards education of the students who meet the qualifications for the AP program. The assumption was that these students value their education and are willing to maintain high levels of attendance, assignment completion rates, and academic achievement (GPA). The students interviewed for this study met the prerequisite requirements for the AP program (prior GPA, state assessment scores, and recommendations). The dependent variable was the student course taking behavior of AP and non-AP students. The course taking behavior of the students was determined by the attitude/perception of the students who were currently enrolled and were not enrolled in the AP program. The plan was to gain insight into the attitudes/perceptions of AP-qualified students towards the AP program, and to discover an explanation of why qualified African-American students are not enrolling AP classes.

Table 1 provides a basic outline of dynamics that this dissertation explored.

Table 1

*Abstract and Concrete Causes and Outcomes*

Plausible Causes	Storify	Outcomes Addressed
Abstract Attitude (General & alternative explanation)	Students believe that a good education can/will provide opportunities for a good job; a good education will give them an opportunity to change their station in life.	Course Taking Behavior will reflect a positive outlook on what a good education can provide. Courses will/should be challenging, geared towards career goal, etc.
Concrete Attitude (General explanation)	Based on experience, students believe that a good education will not provide opportunities for a good job (education is not valued by the student); a good education will not give them an opportunity to change their station in life; “even though I have the credentials, I will not receive the same opportunities as white students.”	Course Taking Behavior will not reflect a positive outlook on what a good education can provide. Courses will most likely remain 1st level, basic, minimum skill required types of courses.
Concrete Attitude (Alternative explanation)	Based on experience, students believe that a good education can/will provide opportunities for a good job; a good education will give them an opportunity to change their station in life. Resources and support are available, and students have met the necessary requirements to qualify for AP classes.	Course Taking Behavior does not reflect a positive outlook on what a good education can provide. Courses will likely remain 1st level and basic.

**Data Collected**

To be able to test the alternative explanation to Mickelson’s attitude-achievement paradox (1990), *qualified students who value education but do not participate in the AP program*, insight into student attitudes was accessed via focused questioning. I used a qualitative approach to learn AP-qualified student attitudes about the AP program.

Qualification was determined by cumulative grade point average, previous assessment data, and recommendations. Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as a process for understanding based on methodological traditions of inquiry. An inductive approach is an approach in which one thing leads to another, like scaffolding (Lichtman, 2001). The inductive approach allows patterns to be found without determining in advance what those patterns may be. In this qualitative study, I was interested in understanding how and why AP-qualified students chose to participate or not participate in the AP program. This method of study allows the voice of the students being interviewed to provide a deeper meaning of their attitudes towards the AP program. Merely looking at numbers and answers may give an idea about what the students are thinking but hearing their voice and recording their words allowed a greater analysis of the details of their thoughts (Hatch, 2002). The students – not the researcher – are the primary focus of the study when a qualitative method is used (Thompson, 2013).

In this study, I used participant interviews, school district identification documents and records, and statistical data on AP-qualified students within the district. The school district data was used to identify the students who met the qualifications for the AP program, and thus qualified them to be interviewed and studied. The students participated in an interview, centered on questions that were designed to get to the core of why they chose to participate or not participate in the AP program, despite all students in the study being qualified to do so. Each interview was analyzed using open coding, which comprised examining, comparing, and categorizing data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Thompson, 2013). Open coding is the practice of identifying repeated words and phrases in order to identify themes.



## **Survey/Interview Protocol**

Below is a list of questions based on Mickelson's (1990) research (survey questions), followed by questions that allowed a deeper understanding of student perceptions about education. The interview questions are comprised of key questions that set the stage for a deeper, semi-structured exchange on circumscribed topics consistent with the objectives of this inquiry. Each question in the interview protocol was designed to probe the attitude of the respondent as it pertained to the overall research question. See Appendix for the complete Survey Protocol.

### Abstract Attitudes

- Education is the key to success in the future.
- If everyone in America gets a good education, we can end poverty.
- Achievement and effort in school lead to job success later on.
- The way for poor people to become middle class is for them to get a good education.
- School success is not necessarily a clear path to a better life.
- Getting a good education is a practical road to success for young black (white) man (woman) like me.
- Young white (black) women (men) like me have a chance of making it if we do well in school.
- Education really pays off in the future for young black (white) men (women) like me.

### Concrete Attitudes

- Based on their experiences, my parents say people like us are not always paid or promoted according to our education.
- All I need to for my future is to read, write, and make change.
- Although my parents tell me to get a good education to get a good job, they face barriers to job success.
- When our teachers give us homework, my friends never think of doing it.
- People in my family haven't been treated fairly at work no matter how much education they have.
- Studying in school rarely pays off later with good jobs. (Mickelson, 1990, p. 51)

### Demographics

- Grade

- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Age
- Grade Point Average

Educational expectations:

- As things stand right now, how far in school do you think you will get? 11th, 12th, H.S. graduate, college graduate, trade school certificate?
- Do you feel that school is challenging?
- What are your expectations of the courses you sign up for? Do they differ based on the teacher? The course levels?
- Why have you decided to/not to participate in the AP program? Do you believe there are benefits to participating in the AP Program?

Importance of education:

- Do you feel that an education is important for getting a job later?

Treatment by teachers:

Do you agree:

- (1) when you work hard on schoolwork, your teachers praise your efforts?
- (2) In class you often feel “put down” by your teachers
- (3) most of your teachers really listen to what you have to say?

Attitude towards teachers:

Do you agree:

- (1) The teaching is good at your school
- (2) teachers are interested in students?

Support:

- Do you agree that teachers provide support for student success?
- Do you feel that your teachers are supportive of your education?

Satisfaction:

- Do you agree with the following statement about why you go to school? I get a feeling of satisfaction from doing what I am supposed to do in class

Good Student:

- Do you think that other students see you as a good student?

Troublemaker:

- Do you think other students see you as a troublemaker?

Try Hard:

- How often do you try as hard as you can in math, English, history, and science?

Working for grades okay:

- It's okay to work hard for good grades?

SES Status:

- Parents' composite SES status
- How many bedrooms do you have in your home?
- Do you live in a house or an apartment/townhouse?

Mother/Father household:

- Do you live with your biological mother, biological father, or, both?

Number of siblings

- Total number of siblings

### Number of school changes while in high school

- How many different high schools have you attended?

The goal was to gain a better understanding of why students choose to participate or not participate in the AP program. The assumption was that students who are not motivated will not participate in the AP program and those who are motivated will participate. This study was focused on understanding why students who value education and have earned the opportunity to participate are choosing to opt out of participating in the AP program.

### **Procedure**

- Request meeting with school officials (data/research manager) and develop a positive relationship
- Collect school data on students who meet the qualifications to participate in the AP program, maintaining identifying data confidentially
- Analyze data and determine 15-20 AP-qualified students to interview
- Conduct student interviews, lasting 30–60 minutes, and record their responses
- Transcribe student interviews, identifying recurring themes/categories (open-coding) to be used for analysis.

My role as the researcher was to inform each participant of the purpose of the study, how the interview would be conducted, and how the data will be analyzed.

There may have been reluctance or an urge to respond to questions in the affirmative, due to my role as an experienced educator and administrator. Qualitative research recognizes that the researcher brings his/her own biases to study, and that his position can influence the participant. It is most beneficial that the researcher ignores objectivity and utilizes his efforts to identify biases and the effects on the research.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESULTS**

During data collection, I used face-to-face interviews to gain insight into the perceptions of African-American students about the importance of receiving a good education and the effects that it will have on their futures. Addressing the under-representation of African-American students in AP classes by obtaining the thoughts of the students via spoken word gave the greatest opportunity to receive specific feedback on their course taking behavior, and their exposure to and preparation for AP classes. Using a semi-structured approach, questions were asked that addressed both the abstract and concrete trains of thought (Mickelson, 1990), as well as allowed the flexibility to explore the responses of the students more deeply. Thus, the use of a semi-structured interview was chosen as the best method for this qualitative research.

The focus of this research was to determine if there is an alternative explanation for why African-American students who can take AP classes are not taking the classes, thus contributing to the under-representation of African-American students in AP. According to Mickelson (1990), the attitude-achievement paradox explains that there are two trains of thought, abstract and concrete, that are in operation simultaneously within each person. In the abstract, African-American students believe that the best path towards success is through a good education. This is based on achieving the American dream and reaching a status of success. However, in the concrete, African-American students do not, in fact, believe that a good education will change their lot in life due to life experiences. While research has been conducted on minority students from low socio-economic backgrounds (poor homes, poor schools, low test scores), little attention has been paid to the African-American students who

have the academic ability and the resources to take AP classes but are refusing to do so. The alternative explanation should address why a student who believes that a good education in both the abstract and in the concrete, is important but are still not participating in the AP program.

During this research, it was imperative that I paid attention to student responses and that I understood how their responses reflected their interactions with their educational experiences. I used the understanding that if a student has a positive interaction with academia, they will in turn perform successfully academically. In addition, with positive outside influences (home, school), chances increase that the student will also perform academically at a high level and strive for better opportunities.

### **Data Organization**

I began organizing data during the rereading of my notes and the listening of the audio recordings of the interviews. I created a spreadsheet with research questions and follow-up questions in the first column and the students listed across the first row of the spreadsheet. I typed the student responses next to each question asked during the interview and under the corresponding student who gave the response. Recognizing that not every student was asked the same research questions or follow-up questions, I anticipated that there would be gaps in the spreadsheet. However, the questions were asked in relation to previous student responses earlier in the interview, thus following the guidelines of a semi-structured interview.

In organizing the spreadsheet, I noticed that certain themes were beginning to emerge. I began to place the student responses into categories that best fit the student responses and captured the thoughts of the students, in concert with the original research question about

student mobility and an alternate explanation as to why academically successful African-American students were not taking AP classes.

### **Student Interviews**

The interview protocol was written based on previous research questions by Mickelson (1990), centered on the two major areas of the attitude-achievement paradox, abstract and concrete attitudes, that students would have towards education. Qualified participants for this study were identified utilizing very specific criteria centered on student success. Students had to be:

- African-American
- 11th or 12th grade
- Scored proficient on their End of Course Exams (EOC)
  - Algebra I
  - English 10
  - Biology
- Attend a neighborhood school in the Kansas City Public School District (KCPS)
  - Central Academy of Excellence
  - East High School
  - Northeast High School
  - Southeast High School

The initial request was made to KCPS to conduct research within the district. Upon gaining district approval, the above criteria were given to the Research and Data department, who then returned a spreadsheet of 111 students who met most of the criteria.

Table 2

*Number of Students Who Met Most of the Research Criteria by Ethnicity*

African-American	Asian	Hispanic	Multi-Racial	Other
50	12	47	1	1

With further analysis, the number of possible students to be interviewed was narrowed down by looking at the end of course test scores, which then produced a total of 19 students who met 100% of the criteria listed above. The students were evenly split among the four neighborhood schools, which allowed for diverse opinions about student perceptions of education. An email was sent to each principal, requesting an opportunity to have an initial meeting with the student at the school. Once permission was granted, a signed parent letter was obtained and 30- to 45-minute interviews took place within a few days of receiving the parent consent form.

Even though there were 19 qualified students, nine of the students were Early College Academy (ECA) students at Penn Valley Community College. To provide opportunities for students who are ready for the challenge, KCPS has partnered with Penn Valley to provide students an opportunity to take college courses while in high school. Students spend their junior and senior years of high school on Penn Valley's campus and can earn an Associate Degree and a high school diploma simultaneously. Once admitted into the ECA program, the students do not come to their high school during school hours and were thus unable to be interviewed.

The other ten students did participate in the research and were very excited to share their thoughts on the value of a good education as African-American students. The interviews



took place at the student's home school to minimize the disruption to their day, and to ensure a level of comfort on the part of the student. During the interview, the students were recorded, giving their names, grades, and school, but their identities have been withheld during the writing of this research.

I explained to the students that these questions were to get an understanding of their perceptions of education and how important they felt a good education was to their success. In addition, I explained that I wanted to explore their understanding of AP classes and if they were participating in the AP program. Initially, the students were nervous about answering the questions, but I put them at ease by assuring them that they would remain anonymous and that they could openly and freely talk about their thoughts and opinions. Once assured, the students were able to speak openly and honestly about education and its importance, for the entirety of the allotted interview time. Each interview consisted of open-ended questions, which allowed honest student response and the freedom to explore the answers that the students gave. The questions were framed so that student response was based on their own experiences, with follow-up questions centered on getting to the "why" of the student response. The open-ended questioning allowed me to stay in line with the goals of the research as well as to collect and organize data in an efficient manner. I arranged student responses by question in a spreadsheet, which allowed comparison of the responses and identifying themes. Themes were created by the frequency of specific words or phrases, that conveyed a reoccurring thought by the students.

Tables 3–7 give demographic background on the students who participated in the study. The information in the tables provides background information that may, or may not, play an important role in the decision-making process of each student. According to the Kids

Count Data Center, 66% of African-American children live in single-parent homes (Annie E. Casie Foundation Kids Count Data Center, 2018). Table 3 shows that of the students interviewed, 80% live in a single-parent home. Studies have shown that minority children who grow up in a single-parent home experience greater amounts of struggle; however, by qualifying for this study, these students have shown a great amount of resilience and persistence to be successful. Tables 4, 5, and 6 represent data that give possible insight about the financial strength of each family and the capability of the parents to provide experiences and support that would foster academic success. The number of high schools attended by the students shows the stability of the home and the fact that students experience consistency in their education. By attending one high school, it is reasonable to assume that the students have built sustaining relationships with the faculty, staff, and their peers. Familiarity with one's surroundings can lead students to become comfortable and more willing to try new experiences. Even if the students do not feel a sense of connection to the school, there is still a certain level of comfort in knowing what to expect.

Table 3

*Participants Who Live in Single-parent or Two-parent Homes*

Parent/s in the Home	Participants
Mom	7
Dad	1
Both	2

Table 4

*Siblings of Participants in the Home*

Number of Siblings in the Home	Participants
0	1
1	4
2	3
3	2

Table 5

*Participant Housing*

House or Apartment	Participants
House	8
Apartment	1
Duplex	1

Table 6

*Number of Bedrooms in Housing*

Number of Bedrooms in the Home	Participant
1	0
2	2
3	3
4	5

Table 7

*Number of High Schools Attended by Participants*

Number of High Schools Attended	Students
1	6
2	4

**Interview question 1.** Tell me about your thoughts on education. What are the benefits for the average person in the U.S.? I wanted to get an understanding of how the student felt about education in general, and what they felt the benefits were to obtain a good education. Despite being African-American and from urban schools, if the students were able to convey positive thoughts on education, that would support the idea that in the abstract (Mickelson, 1990) these students felt education was important. Their ability to articulate clear benefits of education would further cement the notion that they felt education was important. Of the ten participants, students 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 10 answered this question with positive responses, namely that education is an important key to success. Student 1 stated, “an education is important because it gets you where you want to be. It leads to a successful career.” Students 4, 7, 9, and 10 explicitly referenced education being the key to college, scholarships, and career opportunities. However, the response of Student 6 did not appear to be in the affirmative for education but was more in line with the concrete mindset explained by Mickelson (1990), which stems from experience. During the interview, Student 6 stated,

Parents should determine if school is for their child early. Students should know by the 10th grade if school is for them. If they can’t find a talent in school, they should look outside of school. Find what you’re good at and try what you like. Leave school...and possibly go back later. College isn’t for everyone and a diploma vs. GED does not matter.”

Student 6 was the only student to openly advocate for an alternative to education, by suggesting that the student should determine early if school is for them. This led me to ask if they felt school was a waste of time, and the response was simply yes – for some. Even though Student 6 did not immediately respond favorably for education, he did leave the door open to come back and finish later. This question allowed me to gauge if the student felt education was important or not. The assumption is that, whether the student looks favorably or unfavorably on education will govern the course taking decisions and thus positively or negatively affect the number of African-Americans who take AP classes.

**Interview question 2.** How do you expect to benefit from education personally? Be as specific as you can. This question served as a follow-up question to question 1, because it allowed the students to personalize what they thought about the benefits of education. Each student gave very specific answers about their goals, ranging from entrepreneurship to pediatric nurse, EMT, and politics. Student 3 gave a passionate response to question 2, stating, “I want to go to college and further my life. I want to earn a doctorate degree, set an example for others, and breed success.” He mentioned hardships that they had experienced; however, despite their experiences, education was the clear path towards success. Student 8, like Student 6, did not give a positive explanation on her thoughts about education. Student 8 originally stated that schools were designed to only “get you out.” Student 8 added in her response to question 2 that she felt she had “no connection to school and no favorite teacher.” Student 8 did display some intrinsic motivation in stating, “I hate getting Cs and Ds, so I push myself and research on my own.” Based on the responses of the students, each believed that

they will benefit from education either directly (college, career) or indirectly (intrinsically motivated not to fail).

**Interview question 4.** How do you select courses you take in school? What are some of the deciding factors in your course decision? Question 4 followed a brief conversation that centered on the students' thoughts on whether they felt education paid off the same for everyone in the U.S. I wanted to gauge if their course taking behavior was impacted by their thoughts on whether they felt that education would have the same benefit for everyone. I wanted to see if they would offer race, socio-economics, or personal experience as reasons for education not paying off the same, or if they would attribute the differences to a matter personal choice. Student 3 felt that education would pay off the same for everyone and that "Yes, it's okay to be smart." With respect to interview question 4, Student 3 said, "I took the classes necessary to graduate." Student 7 responded to "Does education pay off the same for everyone in the U.S." with a "no." "Some are not afforded the same education but are connected to the right people...some have education but have friends in low places." Student 7 emphasized that having an education does not necessarily pay off the same for everyone and suggested that "who you know" would appear to be more important. Student 7 discussed at length that blacks can have the same credentials as whites but will often be overlooked due to their race. There was hesitation to solely focus on race, so Student 7 again offered up that whites often have the "connections through associations" as a fallback for getting ahead.

Student 8 responded with a "no" to the question, does education pay off the same for everyone in the U.S.? Student 8 stated, "No, education does not pay off the same for everyone. My classmates feel that education is worthless, and they are only in school to graduate." Student 8 said, "What we learn will not help blacks." I asked a follow-up question

of Student 8: “What should we be learning?” and her response was, “We should be learning about finance and saving.” Student 8 referred to the amount of money that blacks spend, but ultimately not having anything to show for it. Based on friendships that Student 8 has, she said that in suburban schools, they discuss finance and savings “all the time.” Like Student 3, Student 8 said that she “followed the course outline per the district.” “I did not alter my courses from what the district listed.”

Student 7 said that she followed the course outline from the district in terms of core classes (math, science, English, and social studies); however, she did select her electives. “I picked my electives because I knew I wanted to do something in the medical field, so I chose electives that would help me get there.” Student 7 chose to take anatomy and additional health classes, ultimately leading to the 2-year EMT program through the vocational school. Student 9 was the only participant to specifically say, “The counselors advised me to take certain classes.” The other students either referenced taking classes they liked or simply following the course outline. Student 9 was the only student to give the counselors credit for their course scheduling. Student 9 did not state whether she felt it was a positive or negative, but it showed that there was trust in the counselor’s decisions. Student 9 originally answered interview question 1 with “education is necessary for advancement,” and “Society says you have to have an education.” Student 9 also expects to “go to college and do well on tests,” which makes their response to interview question 4 even more interesting about course taking decisions. In comparison, Student 2 said,

I took easy classes in the ninth grade...I looked for fun classes. However, I should have picked better classes...I was left to pick classes without guidance. I took a career readiness class in the 12th grade with ninth graders. Course selection should be based on student goals. I did not feel prepared for CNA, EMT or college.

Student 2 was vocal about education being available to everyone and that college should be free for all, up through the Associate's Degree. Their reasoning was, "Your social status is based on your level of education. If you don't have an education, your social status may be low, and you will struggle in life." Student 4 based his course selections on his future goals. Student 4 was the only student who gave the response, "I based my classes on future goals. I always excelled in math and science, but I chose to take psychology and sociology because of my interest in becoming a psychiatrist." Student 4 said, "Education is important and good grades lead to scholarships and a good career," and "College is important."

Student 4 spoke at length about being strategic in his course selections and that it was driven by the end goal of being a psychiatrist. Students 5, 6, 10, all stated that they chose their courses based on what they "liked." Student 5 made it clear that "My course selection is not really based on any one thing. I like to try different things and I take anything until I find what I like. I will take a class if it sounds fun." Student 6 said, "I start with what I like first, then I look at what is required." Student 10 said, "I select my classes based on what I like. I know that I have to take required classes, I will take classes that I know I will enjoy...that's important." Research question 4 provided four different thoughts into how students choose their courses:

- Follow course outline
- Counselor selection
- Courses are centered on future goals
- Courses are centered on what I like

**Interview question 5.** How much do you know about the Advanced Placement (AP) program? How did you hear about it? With this question, I wanted to find out how much the



student knew about the AP program and from whom they obtained their information. Of the 10 participants, only Students 5 and 6 stated that they did not know much about the AP program. Student 5 said, “I don’t know much. It’s college level work and you can get college credit.” Student 6 said, “I don’t know much about AP. It helps with college credit if you pass.” Student 5 stated that she was aware of college readiness programs from a previous school but left that school because she did not like the “academic pressure.” Student 6 stated that he learned about the AP program from a teacher. However, the other students articulated that they knew about the AP program and that they heard about it from multiple sources. Student 1 said, “Students are selected based on grade point average (GPA) and attitude.” Student 3 and 7 stated, “AP classes prepare you for college” and Students 4, 8, and 9 all referenced receiving college credit. Aside from the Student 6 learning of the AP program from a teacher, the other students heard about the AP program during course scheduling sessions in large groups.

As a follow-up to interview question 5, I asked if they felt they were “prepared to take AP classes. Student 7 and 8 each said, “No, I was not prepared.” Student 7 stated, “Teachers focused on the students who wouldn’t do the work...Teachers also didn’t give more work because it meant more work to grade, teachers were lazy. More Work equals More F’s.” Students 9 and 10 said that they felt they were pushed by their teachers to be successful. Student 9 said that teachers had pushed her academically to challenge herself to be “academically high.” Student shared the same sentiments but said, “I feel I could have been successful in AP, but I chose to take yearbook instead. I already have a full-ride to my college of choice, so I simply wanted to take a class I liked vs. AP.”

**Interview question 6.** Do you feel education is the key to success in the future? Why or why not? I asked this question of the students to draw out if they equated success with education. In previous questions (interview questions 1 and 2), they were given the opportunity to discuss education and its effect on them being able to reach their goals. With interview question 6, I was hoping to glean some insight into the students' expectations of getting an education and how they felt the education would affect their opportunity for success. Six students gave responses in the affirmative, that education is the key to success. Students 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 9 all stated that education is the key to success. Student 1 supported her statement by saying, "You have to know something in order to get where you want to be." Student 3 said, "School and life experiences can lead to success, only if you use it to your advantage." Student 7 said that education is the key to success because "whatever you do, you need an education." Student 7 went on to say, "No one should want to be just okay. Everyone should strive to be great." Student 9 said that education is important because "My parents encourage me. Dad tells me I'm smart and my parents help me...we talk often about being successful." Student 9 also stated, "My parents ask me about my day, and they try to keep me from stressing about my grades, ACTs, and exams...I put pressure on myself to be successful." In contrast, Students 2 and 8 gave answers that suggested that other factors come into play when speaking about future success. Student 2 pointed out that success is different for everybody and depends on the individual levels of success. Student 8 was consistent in their opinions of education, despite meeting the criteria for the study, but has not shown a favorable opinion of education. In response to question 6, Student 8 said, "Education is not the key to success... there are people without an education who are successful." She then followed up with, "The world wants everyone to be educated because that's what they said

you need. Education is not the key to success, motivation and hunger would be better.” Even though Student 3 and Student 6 said that education is an important key to success, they followed up their statements with “individual drive” is also important.

**Interview question 7.** If everyone in America gets an education, can we end poverty? Why or why not? Interview question 7 was a follow-up to interview question 6, in that I wanted to know if education could lead to gainful employment and increasing the ability to provide for one’s family. Of the 10 students who participated in the study, seven said no, one said, “I don’t know,” and one said yes. Student 9 said, “Yes, getting an education can end poverty, if chances and opportunities are provided also. A homeless man could have the ability to cure cancer, if he had the chance.” Student 9 brought up in her interview, “There is not a level playing field between schools.” She noted that the expectations are the same, but the resources and opportunities are not equal between students of different backgrounds. The other students who stated no, getting an education will not end poverty, listed several reasons why it will not. Student 1 commented on the levels of education: “No, getting an education will not end poverty... there are levels of education that separate the schools.” Student 2 mentioned that the cost of living will continue to rise, and the dropout rate will increase due to unmotivated students. Student 2 tied income to educational levels and connected the rise in cost of living with the dropout rate because “more people will see that getting an education does not match the rise in cost of living and will give up...thus increasing the dropout rate.”

Student 5 attributed the continuation of poverty to selfish people and cruelty. “No matter the education, there will be selfish people. Poverty will continue due to selfishness and cruelty. Education and poverty do not connect...because an education does not mean you give to those in need.” Student 7 and Student 8 both mentioned how an education does not

necessarily make one “smart,” nor does an education correct the economy. Student 7 said, “There are dumb rich people who spend money on dumb things...until they run out of money. Whereas, we need to fix our home/community...but most people won’t let it be fixed.” Student 8 stated, “there are people with an education who can’t find jobs. The economy will not allow for poverty to end.” Student 3 thought that getting an education would not end poverty, like Student 8, because of outside forces that are out of the control of the impoverished. Student 3 said, “No, getting an education will not end poverty. The system will find a way to keep those in poverty...in poverty.” I asked a follow-up question: who or what is the system? and Student 3 responded with, “They equals the government, business, people of power.” I asked another follow-up question: who are the people in power? Student 3 said, “The people with money.” Interview question 7 allowed the students to share their thoughts on education and the effects it has on their social status. This question touched on concrete attitude that Mickelson (1990) discussed in her attitude-achievement paradox. Most of the students previously stated that education is important (abstract), but in the concrete, they are not voicing confidence in the ability of an education to make a change.

**Interview question 8.** Does achievement and effort in school lead to job success later? Why or why not? Interview question 8 is different from interview question 6 in that question 8 is directly linked to the student’s thoughts on education and job success. I wanted to know if the students felt that education is a key ingredient to having a good job, where one would be able to live as they want. The students gave varying responses from yes, education can lead to job success, to individual responsibility being what leads to job success. Students 3 and 6 both said that education can only take you so far. Student 3 said, “Education can only take you so far. One must create their own opportunities, network, and support.” Student 3

also said, “You have to want to be successful. Grades, test scores, etc. determine if you want to be successful. These things show that you have set a standard of success for yourself...you show your hire-ability.” Student 6 similarly said, “It depends on the person and how they use their education.”

Students 2, 8, and 9 responded to interview question 8 in terms of race and socio-economic status. Student 2 said that job success is “dependent on how/where a person lives and/or grows up.” Student 8 stated, “I don’t know if education leads to job success. Many black students are just trying to make it.” She also stated, “So many have chances, but do not take advantage of them. Blacks have the mindset that if I fail, it’s only an F.” Student 9 also went on to say, “White students strive to be better. White students have more support, while black students have very little support.” She added, “Urban vs. suburban” is a key difference in job success. “In urban schools, students do not take advantage of the opportunities before them...why? because all they know is that school is not for them.” Student 9 reinforced those same sentiments when she said, “Black students feel that education will not help them which will either lead to dropping out, having no goals, and/or simply not caring about life after school.”

Students 1, 5, 7, and 10 all answered in the affirmative about whether education leads to job success. Student 5 said, “School is like a job. Training and skill development that takes place in school, helps you to learn how to deal with life experiences.” Student 7 stated, “Yes, education leads to job success. Education leads to more job opportunities...and everyone should be educated and passionate about learning something.” Student 1 added, “Education now can effect achievement later.” Student 10 gave the following response that is affirmative to interview question 8, but also has a hint of negativity towards the question.

“Yes, education is important to job success. However, the focus needs to be on the ninth grade (find creative ways to give information to ninth graders because they don’t listen).”

Student 10 also said, “Education won’t matter for black boys, because they are being negatively targeted more than any other group.”

Interview question 8 led to a follow-up question, what role do you feel school plays in success? Student 8 said that she felt school was a “means to an end” and “I don’t like school, but I need it so that I don’t struggle and live paycheck to paycheck.” Student 9 said, “School plays an important role in success, but there is more that can be done.” Student 9 also said, “Staff come to teach, but if the student doesn’t care then the teacher gives up. Schools should work harder with students who struggle. We need teachers who care about struggling students.” Student 9 thought that school played an important role in future success, but she also alluded to the differences in how schools operate with different students. Student effort can dictate teacher effort, which can have a positive or negative impact on student success.

A second follow-up question to the previous one was, what challenges do you expect/anticipate you will face after high school and beyond? The answer to this question gave me an idea as to what the students believed can hinder them from being successful. The original question of education leading to job success, and then what role does the school play in success, set the stage for the challenges they believe they will face. The challenge most stated was overcoming racial stereotypes. Students 2, 3, 4, and 9 all stated that they felt they would have to overcome racial biases. Students 2 and 9 listed gender stereotypes as a barrier they will have to overcome. Student 9 went on to say, “Racial (because I’m black, I’m not good enough), Gender (because I’m female, I shouldn’t be here).” In addition to the previous

statement, Student 9 also pointed out, “Blacks experience social prejudice, which leads to missed opportunities. White students have connections due to their skin color.”

Student 1 thought that “college and finances” were the challenges she would face after high school. Student 4 mentioned finances as a challenge as well. Student 6, however, said, “My challenges will have nothing to do with race.” According to Student 6, “personal drive is more important. No matter what school you attend, you will have opportunities to be successful despite your race or gender.” Student 6 did point out that race and gender may play a role in life after school but noted that if students “set themselves up by doing what is asked in school, the challenges should be no more than what can be reasonably expected.”

Another follow-up question was, do you feel that post-secondary opportunities are similar for minorities and non-minorities? This question was aimed at finding out more about what role the school/education plays in future success. Their answers continued to highlight how the students in the abstract believe that education is important, but in the concrete do not believe it will make a difference. One student respondent stated adamantly that personal drive was the key, but the other nine students began to fall in line with the research conclusion of Mickelson (1990). This follow-up question elicited a wide range of answers and explanations. Student 1 said, “Post-secondary opportunities is all about networking. It’s easier for whites because they have money. Money is the difference, not race.” Student 2 answered, “No. White privilege, socio-economic, and social status keep opportunities from being similar.” Student 2 said, “We need college, but blacks have a harder road towards college. If teachers pushed harder, black students could be successful.” Student 2 thought that to make opportunities equal, urban schools need to put more resources in the school. Student 2 thought that gender equality will take place before racial equality, and not feeling

things are equal could be a plausible explanation for why motivation is lacking among black students.

Student 3's response was a yes and no, on whether or not opportunities will be similar for minority and non-minority students. "White students have more outlets to get into college...they are exposed to college at an earlier age than blacks... White students take high school classes in middle school and college classes in high school." Student 3 said, "Black students learn about college late, are taught at a lower level, and are not prepared for college (due to living situation, teachers, and lack of motivation)." Student 4 answered, "No, whites have a better chance, they assume that they will always do well." Student 4 believed, "Blacks have limited options, can't afford better, and face stereotypes that hold them back...also their living situations can hold them back as well." Student 4 also said, "Due to institutionalized racism, blacks are seen as less than whites."

Student 6 said, "Minorities feel like we aren't good enough. Family education can keep expectations high or low... if the parents are educated, there is a greater chance that the student will be educated." Student 8 stated, "White students have everything given to them. They have better schools and better teachers which leads to a better education." According to Student 8, "Blacks have to be better than whites, despite having to compete with less resources...which is made difficult by the media portrayal of blacks as not being as smart as whites."

**Interview question 9.** Do you feel that school is challenging? Question 9 required the students to express if they feel that school is challenging, either academically or due to some other reasons. Only three of the students – 2, 3, and 8 – stated that they did not feel school was challenging. Each said their classes were manageable, and that school was generally a



part of the natural process of growing up. To be exact, Student 8 said, “No, school is not challenging...I either take the classes and pass, or I don’t graduate.” Student 8 did not offer any further explanation other than, “It’s what I have to do.” However, Students 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10 all stated that school was challenging for one reason or another. Student 10 said, “Yes, school is challenging. It is difficult to make friends, stay on schedule, keeping up with academics, and working with teachers.” Student 6 also stated that staying on schedule and academics presented a number of challenges. “Yes, school is challenging...even though I feel I am smart, I still struggle sometimes with assignments and the time constraints teachers place on them.”

Students 4 and 5 each mentioned that school was challenging because of the new content that teachers present to class. Student 4 said that school was both challenging and not challenging. “I think Yes and No on whether or not school is challenging,” said Student 4. “Yes, due to new content...no because the content is often repeated.” Student 5 said, “Yes school is challenging, because of the new information and content.” Their responses spoke to their interaction with new content and their level of comfort that comes with it, either due to content delivery or classroom culture. Thus, based on their responses I was led to ask a follow-up question that explored the student’s relationship with their teachers in the classroom.

I offered as a follow-up question, do you agree that teaching is good in your school? Many of the students thought that in certain classes, teaching was good in their schools. Student 4 said yes and no because, “Some teachers will go the extra mile and believe in you, while other teachers are there to just collect a paycheck.” Student 9 said, “In some classes, the teachers are absent a lot, which puts students behind.” However, Student 10 said, “Yes,

the teaching is good. Teachers motivate you and give good advice.” Student 2 gave an answer that was different than the other students, a response that focused on the students as opposed to the teachers. Student 2 said, “Culture makes student pick on other students, and put them down.” She went on to say, “Because students feel bad about themselves, they will make other students feel bad about themselves.” I then asked, why do you think that is? The student responded, “Because black students feel it is not cool to be smart and that it is better to pick on others.”

**Interview question 10.** Do you agree that teachers provide support for student success? Like for research question 9, there was a mixture of responses. Student 7, as well as Students 5 and 10, said yes, teachers support the students. Student 1 said, “Yes, teachers support the students by showing up every day...but no, by not teaching.” Similarly, Student 6 said, “Some teachers enjoy teaching and show it through how much they support their students.” Student 6 also said, “Those teachers who do not enjoy what they do, generally do not show support of their students.”

This question raised a more accusatory response from Students 2 and 9. When asked, Student 2 said, “I don’t think teachers try as hard with black students.” Student 2 went on to say, “Black students’ lack of trust for adults make it hard to communicate.” Student 2 expressed several ideas about why black students mistrust adults: “Black students have been hurt, lied to, or mistreated, and can see that white schools are valued over black schools.” “Black students feel that they are less than white students.” Student 2 was passionate about their responses, just as was Student 9. Student 9 said, “Some teachers don’t care and only try to put students out...some teachers try to embarrass their students publicly.” Student 9 did

offer a suggestion as to how teachers can show support of their students: “Teachers need to try and build relationships, don’t force it but try to understand the students.”

The questions in Table 8 were asked of the students to get an understanding on how they view themselves as students, and how they feel their peers view them as students. These questions were relevant in that they could help draw relevance between student course taking behavior and how they view themselves as students. Aside from a few additional light-hearted comments, each student gave the same response to the questions asked. It is apparent that these students feel that they are good students and that their peers view them as good students as well. Discipline, attendance, and academics do not appear to be an issue for any of the respondents, which would also serve as viable explanations for why these students met the criteria to participate in this research. In addition, each student responded favorably to the question, “Do you agree that it’s okay to work hard for good grades?”

Table 8

*Questions that Resulted in Unanimous Responses from All 10 Students*

	Student								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	0
Do you think other students see you as a good student?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Yes. I'm a goodie 2- shoes	Y	Y	
Do you think other students see you as a troublemaker?	Depends on the class	N	N	No. I'm a bookworm	N	N	N	N	
Do you agree it's ok to work hard for good grades?	Yes. Can't be handed to you	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	

In Table 9, the students were not unanimous in their responses about taking AP classes, or on their planning to take AP classes. Student 1 stated that she had not previously taken any AP classes, but hoped to take an AP class the following year – AP Language Arts, to be exact. The other students said they had previously enrolled in various AP classes: AP Chemistry, AP English, and AP Government. Student 3 said, “I was in AP chemistry, but it was closed due to low numbers, and students were reassigned to other classes. I like math, but there are no AP math classes.” Student 10 said that she was not enrolled in an AP class and did not intend to take an AP class because she is focused on taking classes she likes. Student 10 learned about AP at a different school but noted that AP is not pushed as hard in their current school as it was in her previous school. Student 7 said that she cannot take AP classes due to her course schedule and their overall goals. Student 7 is not worried about grades and sees school “as a place I must go to for very little effort.”

Table 9

*Students Who Have Taken or Are Planning to Take AP Classes*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Have you taken AP classes?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Do you plan to take AP classes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No

### Emerging Themes

Analyzing the students’ responses to the interview questions, there were themes that emerged that appeared to agree with the findings of Mickelson (1990) and Ogbu (1992). Mickelson’s (1990) research showed that education is more important to blacks than whites in

the abstract thought, but less important to blacks than whites in the concrete thought. For this research, it was concluded that in the abstract: if blacks did not care about college, did not value college, did not have support, and are oppositional, then they will not enroll in AP courses. This conclusion would not appear to be out of the ordinary for black students, as it could be justified that the students are under-prepared, under-exposed to positivity, and lack the resources to be successful. However, it would be ill-advised to assume that the under-representation of minorities in AP classes can merely be explained by those terms listed in the previous sentence. This research focused on the under-representation of minorities in AP classes from the standpoint of the students who do value their education, do have high aspirations, do have support, and are not oppositional. What emerged from the interviews is that despite a better path towards success, whether real or perceived, these students mirror the research stated above.

**“Education has tremendous benefits.”** Students feel that a good education has its benefits, even though there are more distractions present than at any other time in history. Students are processing more information than ever and have access to content 24 hours a day/7 days a week. Teachers are increasingly finding competition to their direction, instruction, and influence. High school students are not familiar with a world without the internet, cell phones, and Facebook. Millionaires are made on YouTube, and social media and reality television showcase fame and fortune with little attention to how the fame and fortune was acquired. Even so, the students who were interviewed for this study unanimously stated that the benefits of a good education are an important to their personal success.

Student 1: “I want to own my own business, create something useful to the world.”

Student 2: “I want to be a pediatric nurse.”

Student 3: “The benefits of a good education is that I can go to college and further my life.” “I want to breed success from the environment I come from.”

Student 7: “I want to be an EMT...I want to save lives. Getting a good education will help me to do that.”

These students are not significantly different than the average teenager; therefore, they are faced with the same distractions as any other.

The responses of the students illustrate that they very much value their education and believe that their success is directly tied to the education they receive. Ogbu (1992) discussed oppositional culture and the effect it has on student perception towards education. Ogbu pointed out how minority students deal with being looked at as smart or above average. The threat of being bullied by other minorities and of being ostracized by their own group had little effect on the determination of the students interviewed for this study. Student after student expressed that getting a good education was essential to their success and that all students should have access to a good education.

Student 5: “Benefiting from a good education depends on what I do with it. I don’t want to waste it...and I don’t want to be negatively influenced by gangs, drugs, criminal record, parents not caring, and no parental control.”

Student 7: “There are no limits to the benefits of getting a good education...I can’t think of one negative thing about getting a good education. Some fear looking dumb in class, so they don’t ask questions...but I say don’t put yourself behind to seem to be like everyone else.”

Student 10: “Getting a good education has gotten me accepted to college. I want to pass my knowledge on to others and have a great career.”

To the students interviewed, the benefits of getting good education is at the core of their approach to school and success.

**“Education is the solution to most social problem.”** Three questions during the interview process addressed directly the students’ thoughts on education and its effect on success. Even more direct was the question asking whether the students felt that a good education could end poverty. Eighty percent of the students agreed that education was the key to success, which would support Mickelson’s (1990) assertion that in the abstract, blacks felt strongly about education leading to success. The students stated that even though success can look different for each person, the education one receives can/will directly impact the level of success one experiences. It is evident by these students’ academic records that making good grades is important. Either by parental influence or self-motivation, the findings for these students are closely related to the findings of Mickelson’s research. According to the students interviewed, getting a good education is seen as beneficial and as somewhat necessary to obtain success. In response to interview questions 1 and 2, it was overwhelmingly stated that the benefits of a good education outweighed the benefits of not getting a good education. The students felt that a good education would lead to better academic or professional opportunities, therefore decreasing the chances of experiencing the “social ills” of those who are less fortunate.

There was a true belief that education can/will make a difference in the lives of the students interviewed, and to the lives of minority students in general. But when asked to answer the question from a concrete point of view, despite their success academically, the student responses again were aligned with Mickelson’s (1990) research. Students were asked about post-secondary opportunities and the challenges they believe they will face once they

have graduated from high school. Using their academic record as evidence that these students care about their education, their responses to these two questions further proved the theory that in the concrete thought, blacks do not feel that education will help them. Some of the students spoke about networking and taking advantage of their opportunities; however, other students spoke about white privilege, equality, and academic expectations from the home.

According to Student 9:

So many black students have chances, but don't take advantage of them. Blacks have the mindset that if I fail, it's only an F. Whereas white students strive to be better. Black students have parents who talk negatively, give no support, feel that education will not help them, drop out, no goals, and don't care. Students feed off of their parents...black students use their current situation as an excuse instead of as motivation.

Student 8: "Many black students are simply trying to make it."

Student 3: "The system will find a way to keep those in poverty in poverty."

The students interviewed felt that white privilege afforded white students with greater opportunities to succeed and to advance in life. White students benefited from childhood experiences that either enhanced or supplemented their education and broadened their toolbox of knowledge from which they could pull. Black students in the urban core were not necessarily able to have the experiences that would support their classroom experiences, such as traveling outside of their neighborhood, taking college visits, and meeting other successful adults. In her research, Mickelson (1990) spoke about the "lived culture," where a student's reality is based on the student experience.

Despite their goals of wanting to be college students, nurses, and business owners, these students still saw the barriers they will face as major areas of concern. College in and of itself, finances, racial, and gender stereotypes, were all seen as barriers that these students



insisted, they were determined to overcome. Even though the students who participated had 3.0 grade points averages, scored proficient on their end of course exams, and were identified as potential AP students, many felt that these barriers could potentially be too much for others like them to overcome. However, despite the weight of their lived experiences (e.g., socioeconomic status), these students did not give the impression of wanting to quit or of wanting to give up due to the barriers they believe they will face. At times, the students expressed a “never say quit” attitude, that would lead one to believe that the abstract thought carried more weight than the concrete thought. In this regard, the students appeared to be focused on their goals of success and confident in their ability to overcome obstacles, again, despite their lived experiences.

**“Blacks are not able to compete freely for jobs they are qualified/able to do.”**

Student 2: “White privilege, socioeconomic, and social status is different for whites and blacks. You need college, but blacks have a harder road towards college.” Student 9: “Racial, because I’m black I’m not good enough. Gender, because I’m female I shouldn’t be here. Blacks experience social prejudice, which leads to missed opportunities. White students have connections due to skin color.”

Ogbu (1992) discussed the “glass ceiling” that blacks experience when trying to obtain professional success when compared to whites in America. In his research on oppositional behavior, Ogbu described the differences between “immigrant minorities” and “involuntary immigrants.” Immigrant minorities are those who willfully move away from their native country, believing that they can achieve greater success in their new country. Involuntary immigrants (slaves) are those who are moved against their will. Involuntary immigrants do not believe that they will ascend to the same levels of success as those who are native to the

country. This is relevant today because of some of the ideologies that have been passed down from generation to generation in both black and white homes. In the urban core, blacks stand a greater chance of experiencing poverty, single-parent homes, and violence, whereas those in suburban areas are less likely to share these same experiences. According to Ogbu (1992), African-American students rarely see other successful African-Americans outside of athletes, actors, and musicians. According to Loewus (2017), the teacher workforce is still predominantly white and female, which continues to feed the notion that black students rarely have black teachers in primary or secondary school. This phenomenon is true even for the students who participated in this research. Despite their best efforts academically, each student stated that they rarely had black teachers, and when compared to the entire school population, they often did not see role models of success within their schools outside of themselves.

This is important because of the idea presented by Ogbu that black students see their efforts in school as not producing the same outcomes as those of the dominant group of the same efforts. Student 8 expressed that school was important to success and is necessary towards advancement, but when asked what the role of school is, she said that it was a “means to an end.” Student 9 answered the same question by stating that teachers only teach if the students care about learning. She also felt that teachers should work harder for the students who are struggling, as opposed to giving up on them. When asked where the seniors will be in ten years, Student 7 said, “blacks equals minimum wage; whites equals doctors and lawyers.” She went on to say, “In urban schools if you fail, that’s your problem; in white schools if you fail, the teacher feels it’s their fault.” If this is truly how students feel, to

struggle would equate to lack of teacher support, which leads to class failure, falling behind in school, and/or lack of self-confidence in their academic abilities/possibilities.

Ogbu argued, “Members of a social group that faces a job ceiling know that they do so, and this knowledge channels and shapes their children’s academic behavior” (Ogbu, 1978, cited in Mickelson, 1990, p. 44). Several of the students interviewed expressed experience with their parents or loved ones being overlooked for jobs that they qualified for. Students were asked, “Are blacks paid or promoted according to their level of education?” Student 9 gave a personal testimony that she had a family member who had been passed over for several positions within key law firms due to her Afro-centric appearance (dark skin and dreadlocks). The student concluded that it was due to their appearance that she has been passed over because the family member scored high marks in the initial phone interview, which led to the face-to-face interviews. Despite feeling that education is the key to success, these students continue to believe that white students will have greater opportunities than blacks regardless of their level of education.

**“Teacher/counselor/school bias still exists.”** During the interview process, students openly expressed that they did not feel as though they were given the best information or tools to experience success. Several were concerned that they did not receive pertinent information about AP in a timely matter, and that certain opportunities were not made available to them so that they could take advantage of them. There was a sense of despair and “matter of fact” in the students’ responses, when asked about the role the school has played in their academic experiences. In the original research question, I asked what if the students attended a school that was supportive and unbiased, to find an alternative explanation. What I found was that

even though the students who interviewed can be described as successful, there was still a bias present for many of the students.

Student 2: If teachers pushed harder, urban students could be successful. To make it equal, put more resources in urban schools.”

Student 3: “White students are exposed at an earlier age to college. They take high school classes in middle school. Minorities take the same classes later in school and they are taught at a lower level. Black students aren’t as prepared as white students.”

Student 8: “White students have everything given to them. They have better schools and better teachers. Blacks feel like they have to beat white people, but with less. The media says blacks aren’t as smart as whites.”

The students were asked what they knew about the AP program and from whom they learned about it. The responses lacked depth and showed a minimal understanding of the AP program and its benefits. The students stated, to the best of their knowledge, that the selection process for AP was based on grade point average and attitude. They also shared that AP involved doing college-level work while in class and having the opportunity to receive college credit at the end of the course. Regarding the under-representation of blacks in the AP program, it is reasonable to conclude that the under-representation is due to the lack of a deeper knowledge or understanding of the program. The one student who knew intimately the benefits of the AP program transferred to their neighborhood school from a college preparatory school. This student was able to articulate that the AP program was designed to prepare students for the rigors of college, that the program was intense, and that it required dedication and focus on the part of the student. The student also made it clear that at the college preparatory school, the expectation was that all students were to participate in the

AP/IB program. The fact that one school expected their students to take part in the AP program, and the neighborhood schools did not promote it as such, would lend to the notion of a bias even at the district level.

The students in this study showed that they possess the academic ability to be successful but have not been given the information to place themselves in a position to take advantage of the AP program. When asked if they intended to take an AP class, only fifty percent of the students interviewed said yes. The Advanced Placement program offers over 30 AP courses, but I found that only a small number of AP classes are being offered at these schools. Five of the students said they were going to enroll in AP Language Arts, AP Government, and/or AP Literature. Student 3 was originally enrolled in AP Chemistry, but later dropped the class due to course workload and personal motivation. (The AP Chemistry class was later closed due to a low number of students enrolled in the class). The other students said they would not enroll in AP classes for various reasons, one reason being that they did not need AP for college. Despite the lure of being able to receive college credit, for the students interviewed, that was not enough to entice them to enroll in AP courses.

In choosing not to take the AP classes, the students were not necessarily oppositional towards the AP program as a whole. The students did not feel that they were prepared for the AP program, nor did they see it as advantageous to take the classes. One student stated, “Teachers did not prepare me for AP...Teachers focused on the students who wouldn’t do work.” Other students who were interviewed thought that the student perception of AP was that success in AP was “out of reach,” was “too hard,” and that AP negatively impacted the “social” aspect of school.

Even though each high school offers AP classes, the feeling of it being out of reach speaks to the exposure students receive regarding the AP program and how rigorous the classes (general or Pre-AP) are, leading up to the AP program. If students are exposed to the AP courses in the eighth and ninth grades, it can be reasoned that more students would be motivated to participate in the AP program. Earlier exposure to the AP program is the main reason for the creation of the Pre-AP program, to better prepare students for the day-to-day rigors and expectations of AP. Considering student motivation, based on student responses, talking to students in the ninth grade about AP would be beneficial for both the school and the student.

If a school is spending most of their time working with the troubled students, as one student stated, then it is quite possible for the high-flying students to get lost in the shuffle of the daily business of school. It is fair to assume that the under-representation of blacks in AP classes will only continue to grow because school/staff overlook potential AP students, and because an over-abundance of resources are being spent on students who are not necessarily focused on school. One student interviewed said that she felt only 30% of her school's population qualified for the AP program, but that many choose not to take AP classes because they don't see the benefits. Despite the obstacles that urban schools face, she believed that any urban school should strive to get 50% of the student body into the AP program. She believed that the more students that a school can get into the AP program, the better the school climate would be. There would be more students focused on their education, and less about their social status in the hallways. She says that test scores would improve, graduation rates would improve, and that students would feel a greater sense of self-pride.

During this study, the students mentioned that there were concerns about teacher support in the classroom and legitimate academic guidance from their counselors. Students were asked if they felt supported by their teachers, and a mixture of answers followed. Many of the responses that the students gave were both a yes and a no, as to whether they feel supported by their teachers. To be more specific, the students made it clear that some teachers are supportive, and some are not. When asked why they thought only some teachers were supportive, their responses were staggering. One student commented on teachers showing support by showing up every day, but by not teaching, they do not show support. Another student said, “Some teachers enjoy teaching...and those that don’t, don’t show support.” Yet, another student said, “Some teachers don’t care, and only try to put students out of class.” When asked about their counselors, the students had very little comment except to say that they enrolled in the classes that the counselors told them to enroll in.

Simply enrolling in classes that the counselor says to enroll in, would give the impression that there is very little conversation about student goals and focus. Through research, it was found that every student in these schools must complete a four-year plan that must be on record with the front office. Despite their academic record, still, students saying that they enroll in the classes the counselors say to, with little discussion, creates an opportunity for the student to possibly miss out on opportunities due to counselor opinion. No accusations are made in the study about counselor bias, but it must be stated that if indeed students are simply enrolling in classes, that this can be problematic for student success and for the AP program. Students who could in fact be successful in the AP program, but may not have had the opportunity to explore the AP program as ninth and tenth grade students, are not having the opportunity to take advantage of college level coursework.

## **Emerging Theory and Connections to Research Questions**

Black and Latino students make up approximately 37% of the school population in the United States, but only 27% of these students are enrolled in at least one AP class, and only 18% of those students will pass their AP exams. Mickelson (1990) explained that there are two attitudes at play when discussing student perceptions: abstract and concrete. In the abstract, students believe that education is the key to success, based on the American dream. However, in the concrete, students do not believe that education will change their lives due to experience. Ogbu (1992) discussed the difference between immigrant minorities and involuntary minorities, in relation to how perception of success in America is portrayed. Immigrant minorities felt that by coming to America, there was a better life to be had. Whereas, involuntary minorities were “brought” to the America against their will, and therefore do not see themselves as attaining to the same prosperous levels of the dominant culture (European/Whites).

According to Dr. Argun Saatcioglu (personal communication, September 2017), Mickelson (1990) believed that if students:

- Do not value college
- Do not have high aspirations
- Do not have substantial support (both at home and at school)
- Do not attend supportive/un-biased schools
- Are oppositional

they will not enroll in AP classes, and thus support the data that reflects the low number of African-American students in AP classes.



The goal of this research was to provide an alternate explanation for the low number of African-American students enrolled in AP classes.

If students:

- Do value college
- Do have high aspirations
- Do have substantial support (both at home and at school)
- Do attend supportive/un-biased schools
- And are not oppositional,

then there should be more African-American students enrolled in AP classes.

The data provided by the students during the interview process provided three major trains of thought:

1. Education is important, it is the key to success, and the expectation of a good education will pay off.
2. Despite the academic success of the students, they do not believe that it will end poverty due to inequality and challenges (i.e., social, racial, gender).
3. Teacher/school bias does exist, despite the academic success of the students.

Each student interviewed in this study expressed how important getting a good education was to them and to their families. Most of the students stated how getting a good education is related directly to school, although one student did share the importance of a good education does not require a connection to the school in and of itself.

Student 1: “Getting a good education gets you to where you want to be...a successful career and can get you out of the hood.”

Student 3: “A good education is a huge part of your life. You can learn something new every day... it’s totally up to the person to use their knowledge.”

Student 4: “You need your education to be successful. Getting good grades leads to college and scholarships, and a good career.”

Student 7: “Getting an education is the most powerful thing you can have...it opens you up to opportunities and should not be taken for granted. There are women in other countries (Saudi Arabia) who are not allowed to be educated. Yet in America, education is not valued like it should be.”

Student 9: “A good education is necessary for advancement. It will give me the ability to improve my family living situation, move out of my current community.”

Student 10: “A good education will take me to the next step in my life. A good education is my foundation. I use it to learn about myself and to improve my knowledge of the real world.”

Student 8: “It’s hard to get up and come to school. Especially since the feeling at school is that they are only trying to get you out. I only go to school, so my mom isn’t sent to court.” “I don’t have a connection to school...I don’t like asking for help, so I push myself and do my own research in order to learn.”

Based on the statements above, each student (except student 8) believes that getting a good education can change their station in life and improve their opportunities, move them closer towards their goals, and generate success for them. Couple that with the fact that they met the qualifications to participate in this study – African-American, 3.0 grade point average or better, and proficient on their end of course exams (Algebra I, English 10, Biology, and Government), and can take AP classes – it can be assumed that they do value their education.

However, despite the academic success of the students interviewed and their belief that education is the key to success, they do not believe that it will end poverty in America due to “opportunity” inequalities and other various challenges (i.e., social, racial, gender).

Of the students interviewed for this study, 7 of the 10 clearly stated that they do not believe that getting a good education can/will end poverty. This could potentially explain why African-American students who can take AP classes, do not take the time to do so. Or even still, why many of them may take only one AP course, but either drop out of the course or do not go beyond the first year of the subject sequence (i.e., only take AP Lit – 11th grade but not AP Lit – 12th grade). The desire to do well in school is evident and the importance of a good education has been recognized, but the motivation to endure the rigor of taking AP classes does not appear to be beneficial partly because there is a feeling that the work will not match the outcome. Ogbu (1992) and Mickelson (1990) both spoke heavily about how African-American students may value their education, but do not ultimately believe that it will make a difference in their overall opportunities for success. Ogbu’s (1992) research on oppositional thinking was exhibited throughout the thoughts of the students as each one of them answered the interview questions. Achieving high levels of education, in the minds of the students, does not necessarily equate to high levels of prosperity. When asked about what students thought about AP classes, Student 7 said, “Most students think it is out of reach...goofing off is more important.” To the same question, Student 10 said, “Students don’t take school seriously,” as a reason for the low number of African-American students in AP classes.

According to the students, there is a feeling that teacher/school bias does exist, and that it affects their ability to take and be successful in AP classes. There did appear to be a

willingness to have taken AP classes for some of the students, but they feared that they were not prepared for that level of coursework. As previously stated, students did not know about the AP program, did not take the prerequisite classes for the AP program, and were generally not prepared in their ninth and tenth grade classes for AP coursework. Some of the students also said that they took the classes their counselors assigned them with very little question and without hesitation. The low number of African-American students taking AP classes can be explained as counselor/teacher bias, since the counselors are choosing the classes for their students and the students are blindly accepting what is given. The power to determine course paths then lies with the school, and the students are simply seen as “receivers” of their education and not seen as “partners or determiners” of their education.

Regarding the low number of African-American students in AP classes, it can be reasoned that the students who are able to take AP classes have the same concerns as those students who are not eligible to take AP classes. Understandably, students who do not meet the qualifications for the AP program may be hampered by low grades, low test scores, and minimal resources/support. The students in this study do not have the additional burden of low grades and test scores but are feeling the same concerns regarding equality of opportunity and teacher bias. Mickelson’s (1990) Attitude Achievement Paradox study (Abstract/Concrete philosophy) was evident in the student interviews, as one by one they affirmed that a good education was important (abstract). However, there was a clear feeling of there being an uneven playing field in terms of opportunities and success between white and black students (concrete).

The alternate explanation of why qualified African-American students are not enrolled in AP classes did not materialize, and only seem to match what is assumed of students who do

not value their education, do not have high aspirations, do not have substantial support (both at home and at school), do not attend supportive/unbiased schools, and are oppositional. The student responses during the interview showed that there is a similarity between the two groups of students. The concerns of the students interviewed leads one to believe that their behaviors/thoughts are close to matching the behaviors explained in Ogbu's (1992) oppositional behavior research. A reasonable explanation for the low number of qualified African-American students taking AP classes despite earning good grades and being good students, is that these students believe that a good education may not increase their chances of success – they feel that nothing will change for them even though they may have a good education.

Table 10

*Codebook*

Code	Description	Example
Student beliefs in the benefits/value of a good education	Students refer to the benefits/value of a good education (i.e., college and career opportunities, reaching goals, success), value of the high school diploma, why they do or do not take AP classes.	“Education is the most powerful thing you can have. Opens your opportunities. Should not be taken for granted. Women in other countries (Saudi Arabia) are not allowed to be educated. Yet in America, education is not valued like it should be.”
Personal expectations from receiving a good education and the possible obstacles to success	Students give specific post-secondary goals and plans (i.e., 5- and 10-year goal), give specific academic and career plans, discuss examples of improving their life situation. Students make direct reference to possible post-secondary opportunities and possible challenges to their success.	<p>“I want to go to college and further my life. I want to be the first to go to college and set an example for my community. I want to breed success from my environment.”</p> <p>“Blacks experience social prejudice, which leads to missed opportunities. White students have connections due their skin color.”</p>
Impact of a good education on the United States (ending poverty, creating success)	Students refer to the broader impact that a good education has on the United States in terms of how students utilize the education they receive, equality of career opportunities.	“There are people with an education who can’t find jobs. The economy will not allow for poverty to end.”
Teacher/School Bias	Students refer to how their classes are selected, how students are chosen for the AP program, how the AP program is presented to students, how students perceive the AP program, and their preparation for the AP program. Students refer to teacher/school support and resources.	“They feel that specific students are selected for AP. Only about 30% of students qualify for AP.”

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative study was conducted to examine the under-representation of blacks in the advanced placement program, from the perspective of the students who could be successful in the program. As I began this study, the data clearly showed that the number of black students in the AP program was significantly less than that of white students. Access to AP classes would not be an issue as, of the over 26,000 public high schools in the U.S., approximately 69% of U.S. public schools offer Advanced Placement classes (National Center of Education Statistics, 2017). Coupled with a heightened focus on increasing the footprint of the AP program in urban schools, beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, it would be reasonable to expect a significant “positive” change in the minority participation rate when compared to white students. However, the Education Department found that Black and Latino students make up approximately 37% of the school population, but only 27% of these students are enrolled in at least one AP class, and only 18% of those will pass their AP exam.

There has been a great deal of research centered around minorities and their under-representation within different institutions in America. Institutions such as business and academia have been shown to continue to remain out of reach for many people of color. Lack of resources, academically behind, lack of family support (emotionally and financially), have all been listed as reasons why minorities are under-represented in business, college, and college readiness programs. The purpose of this research was to explore the under-representation of blacks and to discover if there is a possible “alternate explanation” for the under-representation of blacks in AP classes. Why are black students who do value their

education, have access to resources, are academically qualified, and do not experience biasness, not enrolling Advanced Placement programs?

I started by identifying African-American students within in an urban school district who would be deemed eligible to participate in the AP program, by meeting a certain set of criteria: currently enrolled in the 11th or 12th grade, grade point average, and high stakes test scores. Once identified, I then conducted 30- to 45-minute, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the 10 students who met the criteria from within the district. The student responses were recorded, maintaining the anonymity of the students' identity, and coded for analysis. The student responses produced recurring themes that would offer an explanation as to why they chose to or chose not to participate in AP classes at their respective schools. Three themes emerged from the study, one which supports that these students do in fact value their education, and two others that would suggest that these students have the same experiences as the other black students in their schools.

This study is centered around the research of Dr. Roslyn Mickelson and the attitude-achievement paradox (1990). She discussed that there are two sets of beliefs that students have towards education: abstract and concrete. In the abstract belief, the students believe that a good education will provide opportunities that will lead to future success. Dr. Mickelson found that in the abstract belief, the black students believed at a greater rate that a good education will have a greater impact on their lives than white students. In the concrete belief, black students do not believe that getting a good education will not have an impact on their lives in terms of positive advancement and opportunities. The concrete belief is rooted in experience, either personal or observed, and can highly impact the effort in school. The student interviews allowed me to discover how the attitude-achievement paradox impacted



students who would have opportunities for success, based on their values, outside support, and resources. I found that the students in the interviews valued their education and had future goals of academic and employment success. Each student was able to articulate a clear set of steps to reach their goals, therefore showing that they had put some thought into their futures and how they would want their lives to unfold. In addition, the students spoke about the different types of support they received from family and from school, ranging from examples and expectations at home, to teachers encouraging and suggesting classes that may be beneficial. Overall the students interviewed did not express having a negative school experience. However, the students did appear to recognize, in hindsight, that they could have been better prepared and positioned for success.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The research question, do mobility attitudes affect African-American student course taking behavior, was developed to examine the under-representation of minority students in Advanced Placement classes. Previous research has focused on students who are were not qualified, or otherwise not interested in taking AP classes. However, answering this question provided an opportunity to explore student perceptions of getting a good education and the lasting effects it would have on their lives. What I found was that despite the academic success of these students who were interviewed, there were still roadblocks in place that would hinder their ability to participate.

The interview process with each student produced great insight into their thoughts and opinions on education, AP, and future success. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, the conversation was able to explore and flow through ideas as they manifested, allowing for an authentic interaction that did not feel rehearsed. Despite the opportunity to

have a free-flowing conversation, three themes emerged from the interviews that offer a possible answer to the research question.

The first emerging theory that came out of the interviews was that the students felt that getting a good education is important, it is the key to success, and the expectation of a good education will pay off. Approximately 80% of the responses by the students were in favor of the benefits of getting a good education and therefore served as the catalyst for their academic success. In addition, despite where these students live and attend school, there was at least one person in their lives that they felt encouraged them and supported them. Whether it was a parent, close relative, or a teacher, these students heard some form of positivity throughout their academic careers. Having that consistent source of encouragement outside of the school had a positive impact on how these students saw themselves and how they approached their education. I believe that this falls in line with Dr. Mickelson's (1990) research on the attitude-achievement paradox. These students are from urban areas where opportunities are scarce, and examples of success are often covered up by community violence and a lack of resources. The American ideology about success stemming from academic success, is what fuels the conversations that take place in many of the homes of the students interviewed. It is this belief that I believe has been passed down to these students that have caused them to be successful academically.

The next emerging theme that came from the interviews was that, despite the academic success of the students, they do not believe that it will end poverty due to inequality and other challenges (i.e., social, racial, gender). As clearly as the students stated that they believed getting a good education can change their lives, they also feel that it may not necessarily lead to actual success. I believe that this stems from experiences that they have

either had or have witnessed from family and friends. These students may have had positive experiences while growing up along with consistent encouragement throughout school, but this did not prevent them from internalizing the negative experiences of others and the environment in which they live. One student explained that they had a family member who was otherwise qualified for a position in a law firm and had proved it during phone interviews. It was the moment that she went in for the face-to-face interview that she was turned down for the position. Another student admitted that she herself, had been passed over for a promotion for that of a white woman with less experience. It is my assumption that, if black students continue to have experiences like these, the reasons to not perform academically will prevail over the reasons to perform, and thus continue to impact the under-representation of black students in AP classes.

The students' claims about social and gender challenges did not come out as clearly as did their assertion that experiences, personal or observed, will have an impact on successfully ending poverty, nor did they connect it to affecting course taking behavior. Although it has been well documented that a gender gap in pay does exist within the work-place, within education, the gap persists between gender and disciplinary action (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). The students interviewed did not elaborate on these challenges but did mention that the current power structure would not allow for poverty to end. Due to other challenges being mentioned by at least two students, I think that it is at least important to mention them in this section, but I do not believe these other challenges have a significant impact on the students' course taking decisions.

The third theme that emerged was the students felt teacher/school bias does exist, despite their academic successes. After listening to the students' interviews, I found that they

believe they were ill-prepared for AP classes for various reasons. One reason was that the students felt that the counselors did not adequately explain and/or advise them on the best courses to take as under-classmen. The feeling was that students were not exposed to the prerequisite courses needed for AP and were left to take less than challenging classes. Students interviewed admitted that they had taken AP classes but ultimately dropped them because they felt they were not prepared for the required rigor, nor did they have the knowledge base to be successful.

Another reason the students interviewed thought that teacher/school bias exists is the lack of effort they thought teachers put into their teaching. I found that the students did believe that they had good teachers, but they made sure to mention that some teachers only matched the effort that the students put into their work – meaning the teachers would not push the students because they did not think the students could/would do the work and only looked to do the bare minimum required. Because teachers focused on the students who were disruptive and non-cooperative, often the other students did not have the option to achieve at a higher level with more rigorous course work.

Judging from the student responses, I believe that the students experienced teachers who may have been operating with a deficit mind-set. Teachers who teach from a deficit mind-set often see minority students as less than capable of rigorous work, thereby limiting how hard they push their students. Understanding that rigor is a staple in the AP program, I think that students from this environment could see AP as being out of reach.

### **Implications of the Research**

Providing opportunities for students to have authentic classroom experiences will go a long way towards improving student perceptions of getting a good education and realizing the

benefits that may follow. In addition, if this can be achieved prior to the students entering high school, the chances of more students taking AP classes should increase. Authentic classroom experiences can be interpreted as hands-on, real-world experiences that transform classroom content into meaningful analysis and thus push student thinking from level I and II to level III and IV in Bloom's Taxonomy Depth of Knowledge (Webb, 2009). With early exposure, the goal is for the students to become comfortable with the required levels of work necessary to be successful in AP classes.

Within the AP program, there are opportunities for ninth and tenth graders to take Pre-AP classes, that are geared towards placing students in the upper level AP classes. Each school offering Pre-AP classes to their ninth and tenth graders will naturally feed into the upper classes and grow the numbers of the AP program.

Providing teachers with professional development opportunities on improving instructional strategies is the most effective way to improve school instruction and impact student achievement (Kennedy, 2016). From the district level, a commitment to providing these opportunities must be unwavering and done with fidelity. This would mean providing the resources necessary for improving school instruction, but also providing support for students who otherwise will not have enough support once the school day has ended. This can include providing an early childhood education centered on literacy and social skills development; offering before- and after-school care for elementary students with a focus on improving literacy, writing, comprehension, and mathematics; implementing a tutoring program for sixth- to twelfth-grade students, to serve as an extension of the classroom; offering parental classes centered on how best to navigate the school system, connecting parents to employment opportunities within the community, offering technology support, and

providing parents with community resources to assist in removing the barriers to learning for the students.

Addressing student concerns about equality and opportunity may be beyond the reach of schools and school districts. It is common practice for relationships to develop between schools, school districts, and businesses, but there is little guarantee that these relationships will create a level playing field for minority students. Internships, co-ops, work study, job shadow, and apprenticeships are often utilized to expose students to various career choices and opportunities. Even though these opportunities are positives, often the prerequisites to participate serve as barriers to student access. Considering the number of students who will need to be served, there will likely not be enough available opportunities to provide for most of the students. However, continuing to make connections with businesses and industries to create opportunities for students is still a better option than not building relationships with local business. In addition, incorporating regular classes on college and career readiness could reduce any anxiety that students may have about future success and equal opportunities. Schools should engage students in discussion about course selection, career selection, work place etiquette, and how to seek out opportunities for success. Teaching students how to effectively prepare for academic and career success would be a crucial step towards decreasing poverty in America.

As school personnel, both local and district, gain more knowledge about the students they serve, teacher/school bias should decrease. Professional development that teaches staff how to identify and recognize talented students would provide opportunities to increase the number of black students in AP classes. It has been documented that teacher programs that include culturally sensitive training can limit the biases that school personnel may have and

decrease white privilege (Ford, Howard, Harris, & Tyson, 2000). It would be impossible to completely erase the biases of school personnel, but it is imperative that they are minimized through active engagement and authentic knowledge of the students (and families) our schools serve.

### **Indicators for Further Study and Recommendations**

The student interviews provided insight into their thoughts about AP classes, future opportunities for success, and the challenges that may hinder their ability to be prosperous. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the students to take the conversation in multiple directions, thereby making the data gathered sincere, authentic, and real-time. The ease with which the students spoke during their interviews showed that they were very much in tune with what they felt is a good education and are aware of the various roles that people play in their academic experience. It does not come as a surprise that these students were able to articulate clearly what a good education means to them, considering that many of them currently sit at the top of their classes academically. However, each student was able to discuss education, AP classes, and success only from a high school student's point of view. Due to their ages and relative lack experience, it would not be prudent to pretend to know or assume what these students will think of the education and opportunities they received beyond high school. Being able to re-interview the students would allow researchers to gather data about their post-high school experiences and the effects that their education had on their experiences. This data would be helpful for schools, who would be able to use the data to better understand, prepare, and recruit minority students to the AP program.

The students interviewed had to meet certain criteria to qualify for this study. Each student had to be at least in the 11th or 12th grades, have scored proficient or advanced on

their end-of-course exams, and have the grade point average to qualify for the AP program. Specific end-of-course exams are given during different grade levels, as designed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The criteria for participation in this study may have been disqualified students who would be AP students, due to the possibility that some 11th and 12th grade students may have not taken Algebra I, English 10, and Biology end-of-course exams. There are two major reasons that may have kept the students from taking these exams: (a) transferring into the district, and (b) absent during testing. Interviewing students who met the criteria during both semesters would potentially allow for a greater pool of candidates and possibly generate greater data points.

Table 11

*Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Test Schedule*

Algebra I	ninth Grade	American Government	11th Grade
Biology	ninth or 10 Grade	Algebra II	ninth, 10th or 11th Grade
English 10	10th Grade		*If Algebra I am taken prior to the ninth grade

**Reflection**

During the summer of 2014, the high school where I was working was set to begin Advanced Placement classes during the 2014-2015 school year. In my excitement, I shared the news with some friends who also worked in secondary education. I was shocked when my exciting news was not met with equal enthusiasm from my trusted friends. One of my friends brought my excitement to a halt and set me on the course to conduct this study. He



plainly stated, “Advanced placement classes are nothing more than institutionalized racism.” Confused by the boldness of his statement, I took it upon myself to read as much as I could on the Advanced Placement program and its relationship with urban schools. Over the last three years, I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills to decipher the mountains of academic journals, peer reviewed articles, and countless numbers of texts, to narrow my focus from institutionalized racism to mobility attitudes. It is my belief that all students should have access to the best education possible, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity, creed, or other factor.

After our first year of implementing the AP program at our school, I noticed that the number of students who took the classes were small and that the few who were taking the classes, were withdrawing. I questioned why this was happening, with an eye towards finding a solution. The data I found was dreadful and overwhelming, regarding the small number of minority students who took AP classes and successfully passed their AP exams. My research found that countless numbers of studies had been conducted on students who were ill-prepared to take AP classes. I wanted to find out why black students who were qualified and able to take AP classes, did not. The attitude-achievement paradox, written by Dr. Roslyn Mickelson, provided me an opportunity to attempt to find an alternate explanation to this question. I wanted to find out why these students did or did not take AP classes, and I thought that semi-structured interviews were the best way to capture their reasons. During the interview, the students were excited to share their thoughts and allowed me to hear firsthand why qualified students are not taking AP classes.

## **Conclusion**

The value this study has added to the field of education is the realization that urban students, regardless of academic success, have common concerns about their education and their future success. My conclusion is that there is not an alternative explanation for black students who do value their education, do have high aspirations, do have substantial support (both at home and at school), do attend supportive/un-biased schools, and are not oppositional. It is my belief that schools, and school districts need to provide students who are academically astute encouragement and support and provide authentic experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. In addition, decreasing teacher/school bias can be done by providing professional development opportunities for teachers and counselors, on how to avoid deficit thinking and identifying talented students in the early grades.

The suggestions listed above are not enough to reverse the under-representation of black students in AP classes, but my desire is that a conversation about encouraging talented black students and giving them authentic hope for their futures, can be started.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Survey Protocol**

1. Tell me a little bit about your thoughts on education? What are its benefits for the average person in the U.S.?
2. How do you expect to benefit from education personally? Be as specific as you can. Give me some ideas you have? What do you envision?
3. How far do you expect your education to take you?
4. Does education pay off the same way for everyone in the U.S.?
5. At this point, what are your long-term goals in life?
6. How do you select courses you take in school? What are some of the deciding factors in your course decisions?
7. Do you put the same energy into all your courses (both mandatory and elective ones)? Are you more strategic about your time and effort? How do you prioritize?
8. How do you know you have the right set of courses for yourself?
9. How do you select extracurricular activities?
10. Do you put the same energy in all extracurricular activities? Are you more strategic about your time and effort? How do you prioritize?
11. How much do you know about the Advanced Placement (AP) program? How did you hear about it?
12. Are you currently taking AP courses? Do you plan to take AP courses?

#### **Section 1 (short answer)**

1. Do you feel education is the key to success in the future? Why or Why not?
2. If everyone in America gets a good education, can we end poverty? Why or Why not?
3. Does achievement and effort in school lead to job success later on? Why or Why not?
4. The way for poor people to become middle class is for them to get a good education?
5. Do you believe that school success is not necessarily a clear path to a better life? Why or Why not?
6. Do you agree that getting a good education is a practical road to success for young people, despite race and gender? Why or Why not?
7. Do you believe that education really pays off in the future for minorities? Non-minorities? Why or Why not?

#### **Section 2 (short answer)**

1. What are your long-term plans? 5 years? 10 years? From now
2. What courses have you taken that you feel have best prepared you to meet your career/life goals?
  - a. Do you feel that you have adequate access to the courses you need, in order to be successful?
3. What extracurricular activities do you participate in?
  - a. How have they helped you move towards your career/life goals?

4. In your opinion, what is the purpose of a high school diploma?
  - a. Do you think it matters how successful a student is in high school?
5. How much do you know about the Advanced Placement (AP) program?
  - a. How did you hear about it?
6. Are you currently taking AP courses? Why or Why not?
7. Do you plan to take AP courses? Why or Why not?
8. What challenges (racial, economic, or other) do you expect/anticipate you will face after high school and beyond?
9. How far do you expect to go in life? Career?
  - a. Why do you feel that way?
  - b. Where/How did you come to feel this way
10. Do you feel that post-secondary opportunities are similar for minorities and non-minorities?
11. Do you feel that you and a white student of the same level as you, would have the same, more, or less, post-secondary opportunities as you?
  - a. Why or Why not?
12. Do you think it matters how a student gets a high school diploma? (Traditional, GED, Alternative)
13. Does grade point average, attendance, citizenship, courses, matter, towards a person's success?
  - a. Why or Why not?
  - b. What affect do these things have on success?

### Section 3 (short answer)

1. Based on your life experiences, do you feel that people like you are paid or promoted according to our education? Why or Why not?
2. Do you feel that all you need for your future is to read and write? Why or Why not?
3. Even though your parents tell you to get a good education in order to get a good job, do you feel they face barriers to job success.
4. When your teachers give you homework, how often do your friends think of completing it. Why?
5. People in my family haven't been treated fairly at work no matter how much education they have. Why or Why not?
6. Studying in school rarely pays off later with good jobs. Why or Why not?

#### Section 4 (single-word answers)

1. Educational expectations:
  - a. Do you feel that school is challenging?
2. Treatment by teachers:
  - a. Do you agree (1) when you work hard on schoolwork, your teachers praise your efforts? (2) In class you often feel “put down” by your teachers, (3) most of your teachers really listen to what you have to say?
3. Attitude towards teachers:
  - a. Do you agree that (1) The teaching is good at your school, (2) teachers are interested in students?
4. Support:
  - a. Do you agree that teachers provide support for student success?
  - b. Do you feel that your teachers are supportive of your education?
5. Satisfaction:
  - a. Do you agree with the following statement about why you go to school? I get a feeling of satisfaction from doing what I am supposed to do in class
6. Good Student:
  - a. Do you think that other students see you as a good student?
7. Trouble maker:
  - a. Do you think other students see you as a troublemaker?
8. Try Hard:
  - a. How often do you try as hard as you can in?
    - i. Math
    - ii. English
    - iii. History
    - iv. Science?
9. Working for grades ok:
  - a. Do you agree It’s ok to work hard for good grades?
10. SES Status:
  - a. How many bedrooms do you have in your home?
  - b. Do you live in a house or an apartment/townhouse?
11. Mother/Father household:
  - a. Do you Live with your biological mother, biological father, or, both?
12. Number of siblings
  - a. Total number of siblings
13. Number of school changes while in high school
  - a. How many different high schools have you attended?

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